

If this pain was compensation for their secret, how much would they have to endure before everything was okay?

Wataru and Yuichi have spent a blissful year watching their relationship soar to new heights. But with the added responsibilities of exit exams and a stressful job, both boys know that their stolen moments together are more precious than ever. Of course, their enchantingly handsome faces and unique personalities attract admiration from those both near and far...and when the sweet and sincere Masanobu decides that Wataru is an uncanny reminder of a love long-past, his attachment poses an immediate threat to the passionate couple. With a meddling older brother, jealous schoolgirls and a school-wide auction all thrown into the mix, will Yuichi and Wataru have no choice but to offer up their secret to the public, or go into hiding...forever?

Two rings bind Yuichi and Wataru in their intense love affair, but the very same rings also symbolize their secret pain in *The Ring Finger Falls Silent*. Prying eyes and selfish schemes meet them at every turn, and it seems no one can resist wondering about their intense relationship. Will the cost of guarding their racing hearts ultimately drive them apart? Deeper understanding and trust are there to save the day...but only if they can stay together.



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The Ring Finger Falls Silent

“Ahh, man...”

Wataru Fujii sighed over how off his hunch had been. At this point, it might have been better if he'd used the spare key he'd recently gotten used to using to go back to his partner's place and wait for him there.

"But yeah... I don't like this kind of thing... In the first place, our real rendezvous is the day after tomorrow..."

While mumbling cheerlessly, he absentmindedly stirred his straw around in his iced mocha glass; he had already lingered over this one glass for an hour now. He had meant to cheer himself up by seeing "his" face just a bit, but it had stretched into this.

"Have you decided on your order?"

From a table behind him he heard the low, soft voice he had become familiar with this past year. That pretty smile that charmed whoever it was aimed at, just the way it did in high school, was probably also there.

"When he had the worst attitude with me..."

Irritated by the sudden excitement amongst the female patrons, Wataru continued to softly hurl accusations.

He had an attractive face and figure. He was always calm and clear-headed. And he was gentle and kind to everyone; a "picture perfect" honor student.

Wataru thought back to the past when he'd been the only recipient of coldness from the same "he" who could boast of being popular in every surrounding high school, if not the entire school district.

"Of course, now it's just a funny story..."

"Hey, Wataru. What're you muttering about alone over there?"

"Heh?"

A shadow fell across his head, and with a start Wataru looked upward. There, a charming man's face was looking down at him.

"Kazuki..."

"You really are embarrassing. Or, have you gone crazy from studying for exams?"

Speaking sarcastically as if amazed, Yuichi Kazuki hit Wataru's head with the back of a menu.

"Is, is that any attitude to cop with a customer?!"

"Don't think that ordering one iced mocha makes you a big shot."

"Ugh..."

"Is it all right for an exam student to loaf around in a cafe for a whole hour? What's more..."

"Wh-What...?"

Yuichi suddenly leaned over and brought his face in close, like he was peering. When Wataru glared back with his heart aflutter, a smile mixed with teasing played on Yuichi's lips.

"You seem to be in the worst mood you can manage."

"That's got nothing to do with it!"

"No? Then, maybe it was my vanity. I sensed an aura of anger you every time I talked with a lady customer. Well, what a drag then."

After hurling the abuse with a sly smile, Yuichi quickly drew himself back before Wataru could object. He couldn't chat any further while he was working, and with a cool face he disappeared into the back of the store.

"Geez, what gives...?"

Disappointed, Wataru sank into his chair.

"I waited an hour, and just when I thought we could finally talk... He doesn't even know how I felt, coming to see him today..."

The contents of the glass, ice completely melted, were no longer worth drinking. However, for a mere high school student like Wataru, the prices at the cafe where Yuichi worked part-time were high, and he could never carelessly order anything he pleased.

"Even if he had to get a job, he didn't have to choose such a pretentious place."

It was an open cafe on the one side street, off the main strip filled with brand-name shops. To Wataru, who was attending prep school now that it was summer vacation, it was a bright space that stood out a little too much.

Not to mention...

Somewhat fed up with everything Wataru frowned at the upbeat conversation his ears picked up.

"He sure is cute."

"Yeah, really. Even in the waiter outfit, he shines above the others."

"I wonder how old he is? He must be...younger than us."

"Probably. He has an adult's attitude, though..."

Adult? What about him is adult?

Unconsciously looking over his shoulder, he somehow endured the impulse to raise an objection to the women who looked like office workers.

Ladies, if you want to know so badly, I could tell you. He's a freshman at T-U, he just turned 19 the month before last, and he looks good on the outside but he's a mischievous show-off, and malicious, self-important, arrogant, and while I'm at it...

While I'm at it...he's my...

"...Boyfriend, you see. More or less."

"What do you mean, more or less?"

"Whoa, Kazuki! Wh-What do you want this time?"

Wataru never even considered that the person he was talking about, of all people, would hear what he'd just said. He hurriedly reached out for the bag next to him, and while turning red tried to stand up.

"Uh...I get it. You don't have to glare, I'll go home. I...just thought I'd make sure about the day after tomorrow... I didn't mean to bother you..."

"What're you talking about, moron?"

"Heh?"

"You've been nursing a cold drink in the AC in here for an hour. You've got to be chilly. This is an extremely important time for you. Don't go and catch a cold for some trivial reason. Here."



After the brusque words, the iced mocha skillfully vanished, and in its place a warmed cafe au lait appeared.

"This..."

"It's on me, so smile a little. If you drink it with that sour look you had on before, the other customers will think it tastes bad."

"Kazuki!"

"Also...."

Perhaps hiding his embarrassment, Yuichi turned his back, and showed slightly pouting eyes back over his shoulder.

"I won't overlook that 'more or less' comment."

"Oh come on, that was..."

"I'm off in an hour. I'll listen to your excuses at my leisure after that."

"A...After that...?"

"I was so busy today I couldn't see to you at all. Just hang in there a little longer."

"....."

Maybe Yuichi was saying "Wait another hour."

Giving up on going home for now, Wataru retracted his right hand from his bag. Yuichi's eyes instantly became softer, like they were relieved.

What the heck?

Suddenly finding it funny, Wataru showed his first smile since coming to the cafe.

That Kazuki. He says all of that stuff, but he really doesn't want me to leave.

Well, if that was the case, he could have just said so!

With the sweet aroma of the steam loosening his cheeks, Wataru gently lifted the cup.

"You really aren't honest, you know."

"...Did you say something?"

"I might have."

Having sensed the looks of the women customers for some time, Wataru grinned at the ring on his left hand. The cause for his bad mood had at some point flown away.

"What I said was, thanks."

As a college student, Yuichi started summer vacation a bit sooner, and when he said he'd started a job, Wataru naturally thought of Masanobu Asaka.

Masanobu was two years Yuichi's senior at college and chairman of the circle called the "Renovation Research Society." Renovation was the technique of effectively recycling an existing building. Before Wataru went into full-blown exam mode, Yuichi had said "Let's go on a trip." He'd then worked part-time to raise funds at a work site the club was in charge of.

"They no longer have any part-time positions open. It was something like Asaka's own discretion that he hired me last time."

"But didn't you have a lot of fun then? When the job ended, I wondered if you might want to join the circle... That's all there was to it."

"Why should I be part of Asaka's schemes? Enough with the jokes!"

Yuichi answered with a seemingly unamused face, and sat down roughly on the edge of the bed. Having changed from the refined waiter outfit to plain

clothes, even his face had become completely different.

"Asaka's schemes...? Come on, Kazuki..."

"He may look nice enough, but he's quite crafty. Regardless of how much you stick up for him, I'd rather not be involved."

"Wh-Who said I ever stuck up for him?! In the first place, he's always worried about us..."

"And that, as you should know, is none of his business."

Seeing that he'd get nowhere, Wataru sighed in exasperation. Even though Masanobu knew that he and Yuichi were lovers, he hadn't been prejudiced, and he was an ally of sorts who tried to help them. Unfortunately, Yuichi didn't seem to see it that way.

"Never mind that, Wataru. Do you by any chance not like it that I work at the cafe? Earlier I said 'aura of anger' as a joke, but I bet you were really in a bad mood the whole time. Then you bring up Asaka from out of nowhere. Funny."

"W... Well..."

"It sounded to me like you were saying you want me to quit the job and join Asaka's club."

Yuichi's direct gaze was painful, and Wataru was naturally at a loss for an answer. If his boyfriend had been the type sweet enough to let this go, he'd never have any problems.

"Uh...listen, Kazuki."

"Hm?"

"It looks like you misunderstood me somehow, because I don't especially dislike your job or anything. Whether you're working or in the circle isn't something

for me to interfere with. I mean, sure, I might have been gloomy today, but that had nothing to do with you..."

With no other choice, Wataru began to explain haltingly. He regretted just a little that he could have gone straight home, but it was too late for that.

"In other words... What I'm trying to say is...I got a C..."

"Huh?"

Suddenly a word unrelated to the job sprang out, so naturally Yuichi made a face like he'd been caught off-guard. With nothing left to do, Wataru started over and glared at him.

"On the national mock exam I took a week ago, in my first choice bracket I got a C. So, I thought it might make me feel better to see your face, but you spent almost all your time with female customers... Even though I was there, you hardly paid any attention to me!"

"....."

"Uh, no...well, that doesn't really matter, but...anyway, that's what's on my mind!"

Wataru felt like he was getting carried away and would say too much, so in a fluster he stopped talking. It was probably already anticipated that he would be jealous, but he at least wanted to make less of a show about it.

"A C...okay..."

"Hearing you say it so seriously like that makes me feel even worse..."

"Well. Because I started working I haven't been able to help you study. I feel responsible."

"Responsible?"

The sullen Wataru slowly and unconsciously got up from the floor where he sat. Hearing these words from Yuichi was the pinnacle of unexpectedness.

"Look, why should you be the one to feel responsible? Isn't this my problem in the end? Sure, you've shown me what to focus on and it's really helped until now...but, you've got your own life to live, and I can only do the best I can with my exams."

"Considering you're the one who got a C, I never asked your opinion."

"Ugh..."

There was certainly nothing to say in response to that. Wataru lost his will all at once, and awkwardly sat down next to him.

Because Yuichi was busy with his job, Wataru wanted to at least make the most of the time they spent together. With this in-mind, Wataru had told him, "I'm also going to prep school, and will try my hardest on the exams." They were now only meeting on weekends, and on weekdays they'd decided they would make do with just email and phone calls.

"I backed down because you said you'd try your hardest. Didn't I?"

"It's not like I wasn't studying. I haven't been feeling well off and on lately. There's one more mock exam this month, so this time for sure..."

Wataru spoke with passion. When he thought about how this could ruin their weekend plans, he could do nothing but get mad. Yuichi was naturally an honor student, He finally said, "This is no time for a date."

"...Are you sure?"

Unconsciously changing the tone of his voice, he asked like he was making sure of Wataru's feelings.

"If you don't get back up to at least a B this next mock exam, it'll probably get rough afterwards. You won't even be able to come by my apartment on weekends..."

"Kazuki..."

Yuichi said the expected lines with an unexpected expression. It was slight bewilderment, a face at odds with his almost always strong spirit. Wataru, who expected him to take a more definite attitude, was confused by the unforeseen development.

"What're you doing staring at me?"

Maybe he was self-conscious, but when Yuichi keenly noticed Wataru's gaze he scowled for all he was worth. His usual self would probably have never showed such a reaction. Yuichi was obviously also feeling slight unease at the thought of them not being able to meet. That reality made Wataru happy.

"You know, today I just remembered..."

"What're you talking about? What about the mock exam...?"

"I mean you, when we first met. Good at sports, tall, not to mention good grades and cool. The ideal prince that girls dreamed of...you had that kind of reputation."

"Give me a break. Did shock from the C do something funny to your head?"

While making a subtly nasty face, Yuichi shot back a suspicious-looking expression. But, Wataru

knew that even that look was a privilege that only he was given.

"I love you, Kazuki."

Without hesitation he brought his face in close and lightly kissed him. It was faint enough to just be a touch, but it was easily enough to surprise him.

"Dammit..."

"Wha?"

"You got me."

Yuichi muttered as if deeply mortified, and Wataru basked in a brief victory. But Yuichi's eyes soon shined maliciously like he'd thought of something.

"You were like a goldfish just now, Wataru."

"G-Goldfish?"

"Yep. A little demanding, just like a spoiled goldfish given too much food."

"Give me a break..."

Yuichi finally seemed to be satisfied by the sullen expression before him. His eyes were peaceful, and he nimbly grasped both of Wataru's hands and half-forcefully drew him near. In an instant Wataru's field of vision went dark, and without time to resist his lips were stolen.

"Are you really sure?"

The touching lips moved sweetly, and Yuichi whispered while relaxing.

"If we're going to put even kissing on hold, we'd better do all we can now."

"D-Don't go deciding that on your own!"

"O-ho!"

The moment the strong repudiation was made,

the usual tone returned to Yuichi's voice. Kind and a little forceful, it was something that no one but Wataru knew.

"Then, you can make it through this?"

"...Like I have any other choice. Even prep school is closed over the weekend, but you have work, so it's not like we can be together the whole day."

"Looks like you've got the right spirit. Well done, well done."

Yuichi laughed teasingly, and lightly touched Wataru's fingertips with his lips as he held him in both arms.

"It's true. Even if we do have the rings, they don't match up to real body heat. ...Do they?"

"Kazuki..."

On the smiling Yuichi's left hand, the ring just like Wataru's shone. He had it off while he was working, but when they were by themselves this way it was proof more than anything that they were lovers.

"Do you have a blank copy of the mock exam? If you can stick around another hour, I'll watch over you so go on and redo it. This is you we're talking about, so you must be stumbling over the English. Aren't you stuck somewhere at a junior high level?"

"Shut up!"

He thought it pathetic that he couldn't deny it, but he couldn't prevail against the joy of them being able to be together a while longer. It was unfortunate that there wasn't even time to bask in the memory of the kiss, but he thought it would be enough to carry him through to the weekend in two days.

"Here it is..."

"Hmm."

The top of the bed was suddenly changed into a study spot, and Yuichi began to pick out mistranslations and grammatical mistakes one by one and carefully explain them. His tone was wise and without doubt, as would be expected from someone who ranked 27th on the national mock exam.

"...Even so, just what mental pathways were you using that let you misunderstand like this? You never cease to amaze!"

"Wh...What?"

"You really were dumb."

If only it weren't for his mean mouth, he'd be the perfect tutor.

Wataru secretly sighed, and quickly returned his attention to the English sentences before him.

When Wataru said "Good morning." at the station ticket gate, Kawamura answered with an oversized yawn.

"Ahh, there's nothin' more miserable than summer vacation for an exam student. Don't you think so, Wataru?"

"Yeah, well...we go to prep school every weekday, so it doesn't feel any different than going to regular school."

"We're takin' a few too many courses."

While sluggishly descending the stairs, Kawamura was getting fed-up quickly enough. Wataru was aiming for a private science school, so he had

different courses than Kawamura's liberal arts schedule, but because they attended the same prep school they still made the commute together as per usual.

"I noticed you bounced back pretty well. Yesterday you said your mock exam results were bad, and you looked pretty depressed when you left."

"Yeah, well...it didn't last."

"Lucky you, Wataru. In any case, you've got a T-U tutor. And not only is he a T-U student, but he's got a pretty high-class job, too."

Wataru smiled vaguely and with complicated feelings at the truly envious Kawamura. Yuichi's way of teaching was certainly professional, but even Wataru had some vanity and pride. He didn't want to seem completely boring, and being the bookworm did get on his nerves.

"Oh yeah, Kazuki was saying I should bring that awkward guy to the shop next time. That when I go alone, he gets distracted and can't work. He really is too much."

"Awkward guy...hey, does that mean me? Damn that jerk Kazuki...!"

"Oh...?"

As he laughed at the genuinely indignant Kawamura, his cell phone, which was sticking diagonally out of his bag, suddenly started ringing. As prep school was right in front of them, Wataru urged Kawamura to go on ahead, then stopped and answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, long time. Do you know who this is, Wataru?"

"Eh...is this...Asaka?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected caller, Wataru reflexively asked back in that manner. But before the answer came, he knew by the kind, gentle tone that it was Masanobu.

"Yeah, that's right. How've you been?"

"F-Fine. Uh...thanks for your help."

"Sounds like you're standing on ceremony!"

The soft voice mixed with a smile flowed into his ear and created a tug of nostalgia. More than a month had passed since he and Yuichi had bumped into him on their trip to Okinawa. Now that they'd returned to the bustle of everyday life, it somehow seemed like a distant memory.

"Sorry to call so early in the morning. Do you happen to have a lecture soon?"

"I still have time, but uh..."

"Then I'll get down to business. Actually, it's short notice but are you free tonight?"

"Tonight...around what time?"

"Um, 7:00 in Ikebukuro. There's a concert, and I have an extra ticket. So, I wondered if you'd like to come."

"A concert..."

It was probably his imagination, but there didn't seem to be any cheer in Masanobu's voice. He showed a portion of the shrewdness that allowed him to explain things lightly and without hesitation, but somehow he was coming across as depressed.

"...Sorry. Maybe this is too little notice. If it's impossible, it's no big deal."

"Uh...no, it's all right. If I went home, all I'd do is study anyway. I need a break once in a while too, so...I'll go."

"You're sure it's all right?"

"Yes...I can just study during the day to make up for it."

"Okay, good. I didn't expect you to accept, but...thanks, I'm pleased."

It was just for an instant, but it seemed like the cheerfulness returned to his voice. Relieved, Wataru thought to himself that timing sure was strange sometimes. He had just been talking to Yuichi about Masanobu last night.

It was the same way the first time I talked with Kazuki. I talked about him with Kawamura, and the next morning there I was with him...

Back when rings were the "in" thing at their high school, they had taken each others' at a hallway sink by mistake. That became the excuse for them first exchanging words, and Wataru had been taken aback and angered many times by Yuichi's rough and unkind attitude, which went beyond any rumors.

I never even dreamed that he was interested in me...

He really didn't know where the seed of love had been sown. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that he was a nasty guy, Wataru was unable to come to hate Yuichi from the bottom of his heart. In fact, his heart tended towards him as if being pulled by some unseen force.

"Wataru? Hello?"

"...Ah. S-Sorry. Um...?"

"I said I'd text you the place and time for us to meet later. Okay?"

"All right. I'll be waiting."

"Okay. Well, good luck with the studying."

Ending with that line, Masanobu casually ended the call. But Wataru stood there for a while, spaced-out while he held his cell.

"A concert...with Asaka."

Right about then an image of Yuichi in a bad mood came to mind, but Asaka was himself a pinch hitter, and there was probably no need to be so concerned about it. He had complained about this and that, but until now he had never said anything to restrict Wataru's actions. Even if he copped an overbearing and haughty attitude, Yuichi was by no means an oppressive person.

"Oh...I wonder what concert it is?"

He had said okay right away, but he had forgotten that important factor. Judging by Masanobu's proper image, it probably wasn't hard rock or heavy metal, but that was as far as Wataru's imagination would go.

"Ah, well...we'll see."

Suddenly he noticed that all the students around him were moving quickly. The time for his lecture was almost at-hand. He speedily turned off his cell and ran towards the building.

The meeting place Masanobu designated was the park in Ikebukuro once made famous by a TV drama. The adjacent glass-sided refined hall only handled classical performances, so until now Wataru had had no

dealings with it.

"You don't come here with Kazuki?"

"We sometimes go to movies, but we've never gone together to a concert or play. But, it looks like he's gone to events with friends who share those interests."

"Is that so? It's kind of surprising, though. I thought for sure he was the type who'd take you around here and there."

Masanobu showed a quiet smile, suggesting he was strangely impressed. He had shown up right on time, and as always was dressed simply and in a way that made the good points of his style look elegant. A very well-tailored blue shirt and white linen-blend pants went well with his cool good looks.

I came straight from prep school...but I wonder if an outfit like this is all right?

Urged on, Wataru stepped into the splendid entrance, but when he looked down at himself, his short-sleeve parka and semi-faded jeans made for too rough an appearance. Masanobu acted like he paid it no mind, though, as he got on a long escalator and spoke again.

"That's probably because he really wants you to get into college on your first try."

"Huh?"

"What we were talking about? I've no doubt Kazuki's being quite patient. Sure is cute."

"C...Cute...?"

While relating the impression that would make Yuichi want to die if he heard it, Masanobu went on to elaborate further.

"Well, doesn't he reflect more of an interest in

concerts than in plays and the like? I'm sure he must be saving the fun for later on. Whether he has a long fuse or a short one, occasionally it's like he's contradicting himself.

"....."

That's a surprise, Wataru murmured in his heart.

He had a feeling that what Masanobu was saying wasn't necessarily off the mark. But, why did he understand Kazuki so clearly? Maybe, as if he recognized himself in him, they really were the same kind of person.

The way Kazuki regards Asaka with hostility also originally seemed to be a case of likes repelling...

He was a little more fine-lined than Yuichi, but Masanobu's pretty looks grabbed public attention. His crisp speech and refined movements were just like a sharp blade sheathed in an elegant scabbard. In admiration of the gentleness of his outward appearance, something unexpected startled Wataru.

"Wataru, watch your step."

"Ah!"

At some point while he was fascinated, the elevator seemed to have reached the hall. About to fall carelessly, Masanobu caught him at the last second.

"Th...Thank you!"

Turning red as they broke contact, Masanobu put a slightly bewildered smile on his face. Wataru suddenly remembered the impression he'd gotten over that morning's phone call.

I knew it...Asaka's a little strange today. He

seems somehow lonely, and I get the feeling he wants to say something... I wonder if something's happened.

The usual Masanobu would probably have been able to deceive Wataru's eyes flawlessly. That's how grown-up he was, and it hadn't been long since he'd made his acquaintance. Yet even to an outsider's eye, it was evident that tonight Masanobu lacked spirit. It was like he had never had the ability to cover his feelings in the first place.

"Welcome. Please enter from door R-1 on the first level."

"Come on, Wataru."

Absorbed in his thoughts, his ticket stub and pamphlet were handed back to him. The age range of the people arriving was relatively high, so when Wataru took a rough look around, he was attacked by an intense sense of decadence.

"This was...kind of a more upscale concert than I imagined. I thought it might be casual..."

"Yeah, I guess I didn't explain the details via email. Today's concert is a band that's a Chinese national treasure. In short, they're a group made up solely of native musicians recognized as national treasures. So, the set-up's a bit different from regular classical..."

"National treasure level...?"

"Yup. The average age of the musicians is high, and how should I say...they're a group with a strong local color. The musical program is arranged almost completely with regional folk songs or songs handed down through clans."

While listening to Masanobu's explanation,

Wataru became interested enough to flip through the pamphlet. Commentary on the musicians and songs was printed in a crowded fashion on simple monochrome. In the photos were lots of peculiar musical instruments he had never even seen.

"Looks kind-of interesting."

"...You think so?"

"I like Chinese films quite a bit. I'd like to take a trip there, too..."

"If it's boring, you can sleep!"

"I, I won't fall asleep!"

At the angry denial, Masanobu might have been stifling a laugh since his shoulders were shaking slightly. That it was laughable was wholly unexpected, but it was good for him to cheer up even just a little, so Wataru pretended not to notice.

"It's about that time. Let's go in."

The five-minute warning bell resounded over Masanobu's voice. The sadness that tinged his profile as he began walking made him all the more charming.

I knew it... Something's happened.

Wataru's suspicion slowly changed to certainty.

It was something about his severe posture and piercingly forward look. His traits were no different than ever, but there was one decisive difference.

I mean, he's like...totally defenseless...

As might be expected from Yuichi calling him "quite the schemer," Masanobu wasn't simply a suave-yet-kind person. Without his mix of personality traits, managing the multitude of his club would have probably been difficult. Wataru didn't know if he was a schemer

or not, but he was at least sure Masanobu wasn't the type to carelessly show weakness to others.

For him to show a side like this...

"Wataru? Is something wrong?"

"Uh...no, nothing's wrong."

Wataru hurriedly sat down in the neighboring seat, and stole glances until just before the lights dimmed.

Masanobu might not be completely open with someone younger, but if there was something worrying him, Wataru wanted to help. If that was impossible, he wondered if there was at least a way to cheer him up.

I mean, I've been helped so many times by Asaka... and besides...

Suddenly, Wataru's face blushed when he remembered what had been said jokingly in Okinawa.

"I'm a hero of justice as far as you're concerned."

Oh, brother! It was because that playfulness sometimes came out that Yuichi regarded him more and more as an enemy.

...Oh. I wonder if it's starting.

A hush fell over the place, and a stage bathed in spotlights emerged.

Within the ripple-like applause, a middle-aged man in sleek Chinese dress walked out slowly. He approached an unfamiliar percussion instrument that had been set up in the center of the stage and smiled lightly, as if imagining the sounds woven from it.

Wataru, in turn, gradually gained interest in what kind of tone this folk music he'd never heard before

would have. According to the pamphlet, Part 1 would be various musicians performing songs solo or as quartets, and Part 2 would be everyone performing in concert.

You know...now I feel a bit tense...

The moment after he unconsciously caught his breath, the hall reverberated with the waves of the first blow.

Downing the glass of flat mineral water in one gulp, Wataru heaved a deep sigh.

"That was...pretty good..."

Ashamed at the inadequacy of his vocabulary, that was all he could say. In reality, just after the concert ended there was an instant where he started to forget who or where he was.

"I can't explain it well, but it's like I've come back from a long journey... I guess you'd call it a mysterious feeling..."

"Good. Looks like you enjoyed yourself."

"Really, thank you very much for today."

When Wataru bowed his head sincerely, Masanobu responded politely with, "You are quite welcome."

After the concert ended, the two had started from the hall towards the station, but Wataru was more worried about Masanobu's mood than he could help. So, he resolutely tried inviting him to a nearby dining bar. Masanobu had seemed a little puzzled, but he soon nodded and agreed.

"...But, to be honest I'm surprised."

Gazing at the glass of red wine he'd ordered, Masanobu spoke a few words at a time.

"For you to be the one to invite me here..."

"Oh, is it that surprising?"

"I was happy, though. I really...didn't want to be alone tonight. Even if I went home, there'd be no one else there."

"So you live alone, Asaka?"

"No, it's my parents' place. Right now, my dad's working overseas, and my mom and little brother in high school went with him."

"So that's why..."

When he thought about it, it seemed like this was the first he'd heard of Masanobu's family structure. Wataru once again reflected on the reality that it hadn't been three months since they'd met.

"Today's concert, you know, is my ritual every year without fail ever since they first came to Japan when I was in high school."

"Oh..."

"They always come at an earlier time. But, due to a disease outbreak going around Asia this year, their Japan visit was rather delayed."

"....."

For some reason his eyes looked terribly forlorn as he said this. Wataru couldn't at all imagine what had beaten him down this far. It was just then that the words "I don't want to be alone" accompanied an overwhelming sadness pressed upon his heart.

Urged on by a mission-like sense that he had to say something, Wataru cheerfully spoke up.

"Uh, I...really was moved by the concert today!"

"Huh?"

"It's no surprise, but it made me think there's still a lot about the world I don't know. Isn't it an amazing experience to be taken into scenes you've never seen just with music? I'm simply happy to have gotten to hear a performance like that. It's like, the things you see can't express all there is about the world..."

"Wataru..."

What he was saying wasn't a lie, but Wataru was intentionally speaking with enthusiasm. Even if it was only while they were together, he wanted to drive the sorrow from Asaka's heart.

"Besides, you could also feel a little like you'd been on a trip. It made me feel like I wasn't going to prep school at all this summer... It was exciting listening to the stories concealed in the sounds of the niko, biwa, and yokin."

"....."

"Ah, I'm sorry. I kept going on and on by myself like I knew a lot about it..."

Masanobu's silence continued for so long, Wataru almost felt like he couldn't bear to stay. He worried that he'd said something wrong, but then abruptly the smile before his eyes became a full-faced one.

"I knew it..."

"Wha...?"

"I knew I was right to bring you along to tonight's concert. You know, what you just said to me was almost exactly the same as what I felt the first time I heard the national treasure band."

"Is....that true?"

"Yeah. You rarely hear people respond like that... In any case, wasn't it a subdued performance? It doesn't have the intensity of an orchestra, and it doesn't get too much showy publicity."

Perhaps he was very pleased, as his voice gradually returned to a cheerful tone. Animation dwelt in his depressed eyes, and it was like the Masanobu Asaka who Wataru knew well had finally come back.

"By the way, you said you're going to prep school... You must be doing all you can for entrance exams, Wataru."

Using what Wataru had said before, Masanobu gently changed the subject.

"Where were you trying to get into?"

"The department of science and engineering at M-U."

"Science and engineering at M-U? That's one of the places I was accepted."

"R-Really?"

"Yeah. Did you know? They've designed a human-powered aircraft as a senior design project over there. So, that kind-of caught my interest. Though in my case, I ended up choosing T-U. This seems nostalgic..."

"And so...and so, you must have passed!"

"More or less..."

At the unexpected news, Wataru leaned forward and urged Masanobu to go on. Nothing was more encouraging than to have someone at-hand who'd succeeded and was nearly his own age.

"I see...so you did..."

"Wataru...?"

"Uh...s-sorry. I got a little excited. I mean, I've been at a dead-end with studying lately... I just wondered if listening to what someone who passed had to say might help."

"Oh, that makes sense."

Masanobu replied easily, narrowing his eyes charmingly.

"If you like, you can consult with me anytime. I might be able to give you some advice."

"Is that all right?"

"Of course. I mean, didn't I tell you before? As far as you're concerned I'm a hero of justice."

"Asaka..."

Even though he knew it was a joke, his smile still twitched. Seeming to like that reaction of Wataru's, Masanobu ordered two more glasses of wine for them. At any rate, he seemed to have completely regained his composure.

With a grin, he offered one of the newly delivered glasses to Wataru.

"Go ahead. Accept this as if from a patron."

"O...Okay, I accept..."

It's almost like we've completely reversed roles, Wataru thought as he put the glass to his lips. Even though he was the one who had been worried, at some point this had turned into an exam consultation.

"About what you said before, you've hit a dead-end studying? Did something happen?"

"Well...my mock exam results..."

Looking at the faltering Wataru, Masanobu seemed to soon surmise the answer. A sudden mischievous look crossed his face, and he hit the nail on the head by asking, "So, I'll bet you got teased plenty by Kazuki?"

"Well, from his standpoint, maybe it's impossible to be nice all the time. But, I also think it wouldn't spoil you to be pampered by your boyfriend. I guess that has to be one of the differences between me and Kazuki."

"A difference...between you and Kazuki?"

"Because I'm not your boyfriend."

Masanobu lightly uttered lines aimed straight for the heart, and looked on with a smile.

"If it was me, and you were depressed in front of me I'd want nothing more than to pamper you. But that's not how Kazuki is. I think he's always looking just a little ahead."

"Just a little ahead?"

"Yeah. Just a little ahead in a future together with you. So, maybe he'd never say something that just creates a makeshift comfort."

"....."

"Kazuki is smart, so he acts instinctually. For someone of his type who can do anything, pampering his boyfriend is really a very dangerous and difficult thing."

As he spoke about this, Masanobu's voice was tinged lightly with regret. It was evidence that he was remembering the girlfriend he had lost.

"I want to go back to being friends," she cried.
That was the past that Masanobu had formerly

confessed about to Wataru. He said he had done everything in his power for her, but ironically, she thought his actions were nothing more than heavier shackles.

No matter how normally Masanobu acted, eyes in their vicinity focused on them to a disturbing degree. That's how much he stood out. The girlfriend must not have had the strength to resolutely accept her partner's affection, just being pampered and protected by her boyfriend. And no matter how much she loved him, she didn't have the strength to pamper and protect him herself. Masanobu hadn't noticed at the time that such a crooked balance had driven her against a wall.

That's no surprise. Asaka is the same as Kazuki...rather too good to be true. Everyone ends up thinking about balance and their own ordinariness...

While sipping at the wine, Wataru sighed quietly. The present Masanobu aside, he had just been in high school then. No way would he have suspected that.

If I were a frail girl...maybe Kazuki's attitude would've been different?

When he thought that, Masanobu's case somehow became excessively pitiful. That he lost his love wasn't anybody's fault; both sides just felt too much for each other and self-destructed.

"Uh...Asaka!"

Before he knew it, his mouth was moving on its own.

"I think it's terribly rude for someone younger like me to say something like this... But when I look at

you, Asaka, somehow I can't leave you be. I think it's impolite myself to say this. But..."

"Eh..."

Until then, Masanobu had probably said lines like "can't let you be," but had probably never had one said to him even once. He looked surprised from the bottom of his heart, and took a long hard look back at Wataru.

"Uh, Wataru?"

"No, well, I can't say it well, but...there are times when I'm worried. The Asaka I know is always in the middle of everyone, doing everything quickly, and even competing with Kazuki with ease... Even so, I guess it can feel like you're suddenly looking off far away."

While he was talking, various scenes of previous conversations with Masanobu came to Wataru's mind.

The piercing look from their first encounter...

The left hand, filled with sad longing, presented in the park with a "farewell"...

Just thinking about those moments always tightened Wataru's heart. Masanobu's manners and composure seemed somehow sad.

"Wataru..."

Masanobu had been looking this way for a time, as if bewildered. The silence continued on for so long that Wataru stumbled on his words, and naturally the unease grew. He forgot what in the world he had wanted to say. Just when he was becoming perplexed, Masanobu's lips at last opened slowly.

"Wataru... Do you remember what I said?"

"Huh? Uh, hero of justice..."

"Not that."

Masanobu dropped his gaze once, like he was lapsing, then a warm smile filled the area around his mouth.

"Everything I sought and searched for in her, you have. I'm sure that's what I said that time I told you about my past."

"....."

"Right now, I'm thinking again that my own words were correct. You're tough like a weed, and radiant like the sun. And yet, delicate like the ring on your left hand."

He knew that his own face had gone red very quickly. How the heck was he supposed to respond, being told things like that with a straight face?

"Um, that is, Asaka..."

"I sure am envious of Kazuki...very."

He made this remark and smiled once more. And...then he went on.

"If I were Kazuki, I think I really would pamper you. Maybe all the more if you were my boyfriend."

"Asaka..."

"It's strange. I had thought that I was the same kind of person as Kazuki, but when it comes to you we're like exact opposites."

The way he spoke so earnestly seemed like he was talking about someone else. Not knowing what words to respond with, all Wataru could do was keep quiet and finish his wine.

On the way home, while hurrying along the

streetlight-lit road, a message from Yuichi arrived on the cell phone. The contents of the message were a simple "I'm off at five tomorrow.", but Wataru unthinkingly stopped and stared at the characters on the LCD for a while.

"Kazuki..."

What should he do? He should probably tell him now that he had met with Masanobu tonight.

"But, the conversation kind-of got weird...ah, man..."

Even if was all just talking, Masanobu's words "If you were my boyfriend" stuck strangely in his heart.

"That conversation was a bit bad for one's heart..."

If Yuichi had been there, it no doubt would have changed the expression on his face. Just being able to easily imagine that made the night even harder to talk about. Wataru didn't intend to go into his conversation with Masanobu in detail, but it was true that he was trembling.

"...Oh, well."

For now, he'd just answer ahead of time about tomorrow. Thinking this, Wataru pushed the reply button. After a night his feelings would probably settle down, and he'd be able to calmly talk to Yuichi.

"I'm meeting with Kawamura during the day, so I'll show my face at the shop in the evening...there. That should do it..."

His relief lasted a moment, as a reply from Yuichi soon came back. Wataru looked again at the LCD, and the instant he saw the contents of the message

he laughed. Not being able to determine if it was serious or a joke made it all the more strange.

"Who's Kawamura?"

That was all the email said.

Once early Saturday afternoon came, tasteful cafes everywhere became crowded and all the more a place with a reputation for attractive waiters.

"Welcome!"

"Now, we can't have you looking sullen like that."

Not seeming to be bothered in the least, Masanobu faced Yuichi and grinned.

"Long time, Kazuki. Any seats open?"

"Just one person, right? Non-smoking, was it?"

As always I can't stand him, Yuichi cursed in his heart, but on the outside he responded with an unyieldingly vacant smile.

"The terrace is full, so please come further in."

"Thanks. An iced mocha, please."

"...Understood."

He led him to his seat, and the instant he turned his back Yuichi grew sullen for all he was worth. Why had he ordered the same thing as Wataru? Even if it was a coincidence, every little thing about this guy got to him.

"What the hell is he thinking...?"

That evening, Wataru had planned to come hang out and stay the night. The fact that Masanobu, who could be called a natural enemy, showed up today of all days made for a nasty feeling on Yuichi's part.

"Sorry for the wait."

The cafe where Yuichi worked used a system where the bill was taken care of when the order was delivered. From the black leather and nylon combo shoulder bag at his side, Masanobu took out a wallet of the same brand in an accustomed manner.

"I haven't seen your face around much recently."

"Eh?"

"The new work site. Everyone in the club's wondering what happened to you. You know how I spent a week away until recently, taking care of an errand for Shohei? They said you came by like every day during that."

"My job's gotten busier."

"Oh, that's right. Shohei said that if you wanted a job, he'd have hired you."

"...You're kidding."

Masanobu had become acquainted with Yuichi's older brother Shohei through his club's activities, and they had ongoing close contact. Shohei, a first-class architect, took a liking to charming and intelligent Masanobu, and let him come and go freely in his office as an assistant.

"You can't help being busy, but if you find time again come hang out. The current work site's a plan to turn a closed-down cheap candy shop into a florist specializing in Japanese flowers, right? Everyone's interested in the idea you had about the display. I could put you in charge of that..."

"Your change is ¥300."

Yuichi interrupted brusquely, and thrust the change towards Masanobu. It was rude conduct, and unbecoming to a customer, but he didn't have any more time for small talk.

However, after being silent for a second, Masanobu responded with a smile full of composure.

"I met with Wataru yesterday."

"Eh?"

"I made up my mind to invite him to a concert. And he happily consented."

"Wataru did...?"

"That's right. He said it was just the right time for a breather. He hasn't told you?"

"....."

It was the first he'd heard of it. He'd sent email to Wataru last night, but the contents of the reply were trifling. Of course he had no intention of criticizing Wataru for keeping quiet, but hearing it from Masanobu was frankly irritating.

"So Wataru didn't tell you..."

Seemingly not very surprised, Masanobu muttered softly to himself. His voice had the sound of an accomplice, and was obviously designed to elicit a response. Like I'll fall for that, muttered Yuichi, and he bowed and tried to leave the table.

At his back, a nonchalant voice called out.

"...Kazuki."

"What is it?"

"I'm going to tell you straight. There's a very simple reason why I invited Wataru."

"Simple...reason?"

"I missed him."

"....."

He missed him.

That line was easily powerful enough to render someone speechless. Yuichi turned around reflexively and fixed Masanobu with a piercing gaze.

"You..."

"Sorry to keep you from your job."

Masanobu smiled, calmly taking in the intense gaze that would have made any regular person cower.

"But, it's the truth. Wataru doesn't know, however. He thinks he was invited to the concert in place of someone else."

"...So, that's how it is?"

"Of course, it probably would have been a mistake to surprise him by inviting him especially. When you think about it, he and I've still only seen each other no more than a handful of times. Though that's kind-of unbelievable..."

As he realized everything had been calculated, Yuichi's expression became angrier and angrier. The fact that Masanobu had come expressly to speak his mind made the situation seem all the more serious.

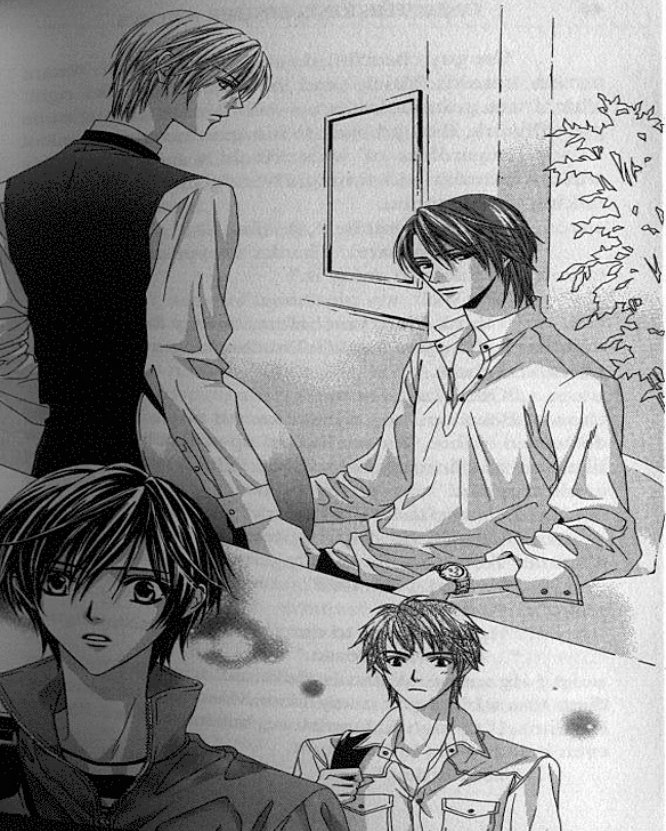
"Oh, Asaka...?"

When he unconsciously bit his lip, he heard a voice he knew well. Yuichi quickly tried to mend his expression, and slowly shifted his gaze in that direction.

"Wataru....."

"The two of you together is really eye-catching."

"Oh, hello."



The guy cheerfully making noise next to Wataru turned towards Yuichi and bowed. That was right: Yuichi was going to meet up with Wataru here when he got off work, then go back to his apartment together.

Regardless of what Yuichi was thinking, this was awkwardly bad timing...Wataru innocently started talking to Masanobu.

"Why are you here, Asaka...?"

"Hello, Wataru. Thanks for yesterday. Thanks to you I was able to enjoy it."

"W... Well, my pleasure..."

"I think I told you before, but my dream is to put together a cafe, you know? I'm checking out places that get talked about."

"Oh...okay, I see..."

Because he didn't know what was being discussed before, Wataru looked up at Yuichi with a face like he wanted to say something. The reason he looked a bit troubled was probably because Masanobu had readily let it slip that they had met yesterday.

"Uh...I'll be drinking tea with Kawamura until it's time. About another thirty minutes, right?"

"Two of you, then? I will show you to your seats."

"He'll 'show us to our seats,' eh, Wataru?"

"...This way, please."

Ignoring Wataru's flustered friend, Yuichi led them to a table as far away from Masanobu as possible. He himself thought it immature, but he disliked Wataru even being in his line of sight.

"Your order?"

"Um...two iced mochas..."

Wataru responded with a tight face, and he already seemed to have surmised the reason Yuichi looked sullen. He seemed irritated that he couldn't say anything in front of his friend.

Oh well, sighed Yuichi, and he decided to let it go for the moment.

"Sorry, but hold on a little longer. I'll cover his...Kawamura's, too."

"Uh..."

"Well, see you later."

Yuichi turned around curtly.

That guy...what the hell's he up to...?

While relaying the order to the kitchen, Yuichi tried to somehow regain his composure. But the more he thought about it the angrier he got, and it didn't work very well.

What's he mean "I missed him"? Gimme a break!

Flustered by Masanobu's confession, he sunk into a bad mood. Being taken for a ride by a provocation like that left him with no pride at all.

"This was delicious, Kazuki. See you."

In a complete contrast with Yuichi's dark thoughts, Masanobu spoke up in an annoyingly cheerful voice.

"Unfortunately, Shohei called for me so I have to go. He has an overseas business trip this month, so it seems he's even working weekends."

"....."

"Oh, and also..."

As if it truly was incidental, he spoke up once more.

"...I haven't told Wataru that you've been working with the circle. If he's to find out, wouldn't it be best to find out from you?"

Instead of answering, Yuichi grinned and murmured "Just get out" in his heart.

"Hey, what about your cheerful friend?"

"If you mean Kawamura, he had an obligation and had to leave. He told me to thank you. So, thanks."

"You're welcome."

When Yuichi came back to the table in street clothes, Wataru had been enthusiastically reading a book. It was a linguistic theory book called "The Sense of English." Yuichi was more than a little surprised, wondering where he got something like that, and wound up staring hard at the light orange cover.

"Oh, this book? Asaka told me about it yesterday. When I told him I was bad at English, he said this might not help me with exams, but it might help me address why I'm not good at it."

"I know. I read it too, in junior high."

"Oh..."

Wataru smiled ruefully and closed the book; the same book must have still been somewhere at his family's place. He didn't bother to say anything about the timing, but somehow or other Yuichi didn't find it funny.

"Uh, Kazuki..."

"Hm?"

"...Sorry, about the concert."

He looked back at Wataru and his uncomfortably downcast eyes with a complex range of feelings. Putting down the au lait he'd brought with him, Yuichi rested his head in his left hand and said:

"I'm not really mad."

"Yeah...but, I'm still sorry. It's not that I went out with Asaka, I feel bad about keep quiet about it. So..."

"It's okay. It's nothing to apologize over."

"But you're in a bad mood."

The upturned faced scowling in this direction seemed to be protesting against the gallant words. When he looked at that sullen face, it came to seem somehow ridiculous.

"Wh...What're you laughing at?!"

"No, nothing. Forget it. What was this concert Asaka invited you to?"

"It was a little odd. The main motif was Chinese folk instruments. But, I was really moved. I could never do something like that myself."

"Huh...that's somehow surprising. I figured with him it'd be classical or something."

"...Something about Asaka's changed."

Yuichi raised an eyebrow slightly at Wataru's slowly muttered words.

"Changed? Him?"

"Yeah. He seemed terribly lonely. I thought something had happened..."

"....."

"Otherwise, leftover ticket or not, he'd never have invited me, right?"

Seeming to believe that from the bottom of his heart, Wataru's tone was deadly serious. Even Yuichi didn't dare offer another opinion. If he said that Wataru hadn't been replacing anyone, it would only serve to disturb him.

Lonely...huh...

Earlier, Masanobu's face had been as annoyingly cool and clear as ever. It very much didn't seem like this "something" Wataru spoke of had happened to him.

It's hard to think...that he took a suggestive attitude. If he's really the same type as me, he wouldn't show weakness if his life depended on it.

In that case, Masanobu was too depressed last night to even have enough willpower to show off. If it were up to Yuichi, he'd say that was an exceptional situation.

"I missed him."

Surely, that statement wasn't a joke or an exaggeration, but his true feelings. The fact that Yuichi got to hear it and not Wataru must have meant Masanobu had his reasons for his confession. At any rate, Yuichi felt uncomfortable by the limitless danger of him having some special interest in Wataru.

"Uh, Kazuki...?"

"Huh?"

"What's up with that troubled face? Just cheer up already. I mean it, I'm sorry. From now on..."

Wataru had been about to continue, but a strong look from Yuichi silenced him. Then he drew close

his face, and when he could see himself reflected in his eyes he asked a question in a serious tone.

"Hey, Wataru."

"Wh...What...?"

"What should we do about food tonight? What do you want to eat?"

"Food..."

After he muttered the word absentmindedly, Wataru, whose face had been frowning, smiled all at once. Don't smile that way, Yuichi whispered in his heart. Even though this was where he worked, and there were lots of other customers with attentive eyes, it made him want to carelessly embrace him.

"For starters, we'll hit a supermarket on the way home."

Trying to forcefully negate the smoldering anxiety in his chest, Yuichi decided to change his way of thinking in order to simply enjoy the time they spent together.

The two weeks until the final mock exam that would test the results of summer vacation bore down. Naturally, the scores would have bearing on narrowing down final college aims, and this was the time to somehow get those scores up.

"It's easy to say, but I'm not confident..."

Talking pathetically to himself, Wataru exhaustedly fell across his desk.

"I'm doing all that I can, but right now all the lectures seem blurred into one..."

On the wall in his room was a calendar with a red circle around the day of the mock exam. It would be

nice if he could get a recommendation that would make him feel a little more at ease, but his academic ability was just at the line for the school he had his eye on. Right now, he was one step below the necessary mark.

"I guess...Kazuki's still at work."

He had said he was on late shift today, so he would probably be around eleven when he came back to his apartment. He did well on his own and tried to rely on his family as little as possible, therefore he spent quite a lot of time working. He would have made better money as a tutor or a cram school lecturer, but he gave up. "I hate kids!" as his reason not to do it.

"He's just acting again. Look at how sweet he is with Takako."

Shohei's daughter Takako had just entered elementary school, and she would call Yuichi "Uncle Yuichi" and was very attached to him. Incidentally, Wataru seemed to be a favorite of hers as well, and it was apparently her dream when she grew up for the three of them to live together.

"Three of us aside...if I got to live with Kazuki, I'd have to bust my butt working a job, too."

It was a promise the two of them had made during the Okinawa trip...

They had decided that once Wataru was accepted into college they would live together. It was just between them at this point, no parents involved, but first he had to pass or it would never happen. At that moment he said "Okay!" to himself and lifted himself up, his cell, plugged into its charger, started ringing.

"Hello. Hope I didn't disturb your studying."

"Ah? Is this Asaka?"

"Yeah. Long time no see, sort-of."

It had only been a week since they last met at Yuichi's work. Given that they had few points of contact, there probably wasn't much of a chance for them to have any interchange.

As Wataru heedlessly thought this, Masanobu broke the ice with "Actually..."

"I was organizing my room, and I found several reference books I used when I was taking exams."

"Huh?"

"I think they're probably still plenty usable. So, if you'd like..."

"I...I need them! Please!"

Wataru unthinkingly gripped the cell tightly, and forgetting himself he begged. Reference books used by a successful applicant were far more reassuring than any good-luck charm.

"If you're that hyped up about it, it was worth calling you. Then, when should I deliver them?"

Masanobu asked this happily, and they decided that Wataru would come to the circle's work site to get them. Being told he could do it anytime, Wataru enthusiastically answered that he would go tomorrow.

"Actually, the next mock exam is bearing down on me. But, now I feel a little braver about it."

"You said you were shooting for an A next time?"

"That's the plan...as it were..."

He knew on the other end of the phone that Masanobu was smiling at his embarrassingly muddled

words. The tender atmosphere was conveyed back to him, and Wataru for one reason or another was now in a good mood.

"But, are you really sure?"

"About what?"

"Kazuki might get mad."

"Why would he?"

"...Well. If he hasn't asked you anything, it's cool. So, tomorrow evening. Good night."

"Good...night..."

The somehow ambiguous ending of the call left Wataru sensing that something was off. Masanobu's reference books would be a strong ally in studying for exams, and Yuichi wasn't such an inflexible man that he would argue. Masanobu should have realized that much too.

"After all, Yuichi's reference books are geared towards T-U, so their level would be too high."

Though not talking to anyone in particular, Wataru spoke what sounded like an excuse, the cell phone in his hand rang again.

"H...Hello."

"Wataru?"

"Kazuki..."

As Yuichi's name was nearly on his lips anyway, Wataru unconsciously dropped his voice. When he glanced at the clock on his wall, it was already past ten thirty.

"You're done with work? You must be tired."

"Yeah. Hey, you're in a good mood today."

"Well...tomorrow is the long-awaited Saturday."

I wasn't able to see you at all this week, so it feels like it's been a really long time."

"Yeah...about that..."

Suddenly Yuichi's voice grew heavy. A bad premonition attacked Wataru, and his tone naturally changed.

"Did something come up, by chance?"

"...Sorry. Looks like I'll be a little delayed coming home. You can feel free to wait at my place, but to be honest I don't know what time it'll end up being."

"All right..."

"It seems the boss' friend has the place reserved for an after-wedding party. As he's a friend, there's no time limit. Tomorrow is Saturday, so it might go all night."

Behind Yuichi's concise explanation was the sound of several cars passing by. The beautiful image of him walking along the night asphalt came to Wataru's mind, and Wataru yearned for him more than he could stand.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not really your fault. What about the day after? Will the shop be open after going all night?"

"Hardly. Sunday is a special holiday. I haven't had an entire day free in a while, so if you'd like you can come over in the morning. We can even go out somewhere."

"Sure...all right."

After nodding slightly, Wataru waited a bit then opened his mouth again. He didn't want to repeat the same quarrel over and over, and this might be a good

chance.

"Tomorrow evening I'm meeting with Asaka."

"....."

"He called before, and said he'd let me have some reference books. He was accepted at M-U science and engineering school."

He tried saying it as easily as possible, but his response was forthcoming. The silence continued so long that Wataru first anxiously remembered Masanori saying "Kazuki might get mad about it."

"Hello? Kazuki, are you listening...?"

"You've got some nerve. You two-timing?"

"Heh?"

For a second he doubted his own ears. But Yuichi soon laughed pleasantly and scolded Wataru in a still-smiling voice.

"You sure are bold for an exam student."

"Y-You're sure enough of yourself, Kazuki."

"Of course. If someone cheated on me after just one year, that'd be the end of the great Yuichi Kazuki."

At the ever-strong words, the slightly worried Wataru had his thunder stolen before he knew it.

"I'm really just going to get the reference books."

"It's the excuses that make you seem suspicious to you know."

"Come on..."

"Don't worry about it. You're free to meet with who you want and where; it's up to you whether to tell me or not."

"Kazuki..."

Being told all of this made him feel like he'd somehow suddenly been pushed away. Wataru wordlessly became depressed, and almost as if he sensed it Yuichi's voice grew sweeter.

"No matter who's beside you, I'm the only one in your eyes. If I can have you believe that, it's good enough for me. That's what I meant just now."

"Eh..."

"But, thanks for telling me. It does make me happy in the end."

"...Sure."

"I love you, Wataru. I want to see you soon."

"Yeah...me too."

The whisper that flowed into his ear was filled with happiness to the point of tickling. Wataru slowly closed his eyes as if Yuichi's voice was the only thing he could sense.

"Kazuki, I told you before. When you want to see me, I don't care if it's for five minutes, just call."

"Okay, even right now."

"...That's not what I meant. Times like this where we just want to see each other aren't bad. Besides, if we start living together...we won't be able to feel this anymore. Right?"

Yuichi agreed to Wataru's words with a soft "You're right." Chances are he was looking at the ring on his left hand while they talked. With that image printed on the backs of his eyelids, Wataru wordlessly repeated "I love you" over and over.

"Man, it's so hot!"

Fanning himself with the front of his shirt,

Wataru stood before a wooden one-story building that looked like it could collapse at any moment. Because the days were longer in midsummer, even though it was evening, the temperature felt like it was still easily over thirty degrees.

"At a glance it looks run-down, but the plans are for it to be a florist. There's even an air conditioner inside."

"Oh, hey."

"Haven't seen you in a while, Junior! You haven't shown up lately. Is studying for exams that rough?"

A girl from the circle who at some point had come up behind him tapped Wataru on the back with an easy smile. As always, the working outfit style made her seem quite different from the stereotypical college girl image, but Wataru liked everyone in this group quite a bit. As supervisor, Masanobu's character made the mood casual and cheerful, and they were nearly all friendly people.

"Well, well. If it isn't Wataru."

"K-Kawamura! What're you doing here...?"

"Heh. I come by to help out sometimes."

"Help out? You?"

Standing beside the girl, Kawamura's face was brimming with manliness like never before. Wataru figured it out, and taking him forcefully by the arm, he whispered into his ear once they'd moved some distance away.

"You're after her, aren't you?"

"Ah, you can tell? You know, when I went with

you to the other site a while back, Mitsuki and I clicked and went out to eat."

"Oh yeah, that did happen..."

"Since then, we've been email friends. She's older than me but cute, yeah? You should root for me!"

As Kawamura spoke he shifted his glance, and Mitsuki waved back in a carefree way. It didn't seem hopeless, in any case.

"Well, until exams are over I don't know if I can confess or not. If we start officially going out, I'll be sure to let you know."

Maybe he was embarrassed, but Kawamura was recklessly giddy. Previously he had been hyped-up about getting matching rings like Wataru's made if he managed to find a girlfriend, but somehow that seemed like long ago.

"No, I still haven't given up on matching rings. But, right now I can't...at least, not until exams are over. Oh, speaking of which, your rings don't really stand out anymore."

"Huh?"

"Maybe it's because since Kazuki started his job, I don't see you together as much. You know, while he's working he of course has his off. I guess in the end, unless they're in a pair, rings like that don't really seem to have much of an existence!"

"Well...their standing out causes problems..."

"Oh, yeah. You two are both guys and all. I guess I'd gotten used to it! It doesn't really bother me, even when you two are flirting."

Wataru wanted to retort and ask who was

flirting, but he decided to keep quiet. Even if he had to go out into the world, he knew full-well how valuable someone like Kawamura was.

"See ya, Wataru. Mitsuki's calling me, so I've got to go."

"S...Sure. See you next week."

In a complicated mood, Wataru watched as his buddy walked away in a happy manner. Did he and Yuichi see each other so seldom as to be told "there didn't seem to be much of an existence"? When he thought about it, he suddenly felt lonely, but maybe there was no help for that until after exams ended.

"Hey Junior, why so glum?"

Another girl holding a large piece of wood in both hands stopped and spoke up on her way past. Wataru hurried to help but was met with a light smile and a, "It's dangerous if you're not used to it."

"But, as a guy I have more strength."

"Hmmm...thanks for the sentiment, but if you got injured, I'd be murdered by Kazuki. He really has something for you."

"By...Kazuki?"

The way she spoke, it was like Yuichi was over there working right now. With a start Wataru turned to face the building again, and that was just when he saw Masanobu emerge.

"Ah, Wataru. You're earlier than I expected."

"Hello. Uh..."

"Sorry, were you waiting a bit? Kana, I'll carry that. You help Kobayashi and Sakurai inside. It looks like Kawamura by himself isn't cutting it."

"Okayyy. Well, Junior, see ya later."

Kana quickly passed the board over to Masanobu and smiled at Wataru.

"Hey, how's Kazuki doing? He was coming by to help out a lot until recently, but he stopped, like he'd switched places with Asaka or something."

"Uh..."

"He shouldn't be so stubborn; he should just join the circle already. Looks like he's read plenty of books on architecture, too."

"Come on, Kana, hurry up!"

Wataru was at a loss for words at the unexpected topic, and Masanobu drove her off like he was forcing her to go. Kana, not aware of anything, turned back cheerfully, waved, and went into the building.

"So, sure enough..."

In the orange glow of the coming dusk, Wataru muttered while slowly retracting his right hand.

"So, it's true after all..."

"Wataru...uh, about that."

"Nice of Kazuki to tell me...!"

Once he'd said it, the anger bubbled up. In a sullen tone, Wataru started letting complaints fly right there in the road.

"He pretended not to know when I asked him if he was going to join the circle..."

"....."

"He seemed so happy back at the other work site... It was the first time I'd seen him like that, and I was pretty happy, too. If he's found something he likes to do, I want to support him...but..."

"Wataru..."

"So, why?! Why did he lie even to me?! Are there things he wants to do something he needs to try that he has to hide?!"

Wataru's voice trembled at the futility of his own words. It made him sad that Yuichi himself would keep his mouth shut after saying they could talk about anything.

Something like this wasn't a big deal at all. Rationally, he knew that. Yuichi's life wasn't so secret to be controlled, and this probably wasn't going to influence their relationship. He might have simply forgotten to mention it. There was also a chance that his antagonism towards Masanobu had kept him from being able to tell Wataru honestly.

"I know...I know, but..."

Even so, he wished he had said something.

Until now, Wataru had never once seen Yuichi have a strong interest in anything. Even now, the impression of seeing his face while he was seriously working was a strong one. He honestly thought he wanted to see that expression once again.

"Ahh, I'm really pissed!"

He shouted at the sky with all he had, and Masanobu looked like he was taken aback.

"Wataru...you okay?"

"Ah...s-sorry. I'm...all right."

Finally calmed down a little, Wataru awkwardly looked back at Masanobu. Why was it he always showed him nothing but embarrassing sides of himself?

Because it's always Kazuki's fault!

Bursting with anger inside, Wataru somehow subdued his feelings.

After Masanobu temporarily reentered the building and given brief instructions, he came back out quickly, saying, "Sorry to make you wait."

"As an apology, I'll drive you back."

"Uh...but..."

"Actually, I left the reference books in the car. Either way, I have to go to the parking lot to get them."

"Oh, okay... Fine by me."

With no other choice, Wataru nodded and followed Masanobu to the parking lot. In reality he felt totally embarrassed and wanted to disappear as soon as possible, but naturally he couldn't have things be that convenient.

He saw me act like a little kid...

Now that his head was completely cooled, however much he regretted it he couldn't undo it. No matter how much more productive it would have been to get angry at Yuichi directly, he had acted awkwardly in front of Masanobu, who had nothing to do with it.

I really do look like a fool.

The sun had completely set, and a navy blue darkness masked the summer sky. The parking lot wasn't too far away, so the noise from the work site was faintly audible on a warm breeze.

"Uh...Asaka? Once I get the books I'll go home on the train. Thank you very much."

"Why?"

"...I acted weird back there and all."

"...Get in."

Masanobu took no heed whatsoever, and immediately slid himself into the driver's seat. Wataru sighed quickly, and giving up, he got into the passenger seat. Masanobu's car was a metallic silver station wagon; the refined design suited him very well.

"The reference books are in the back seat. They're in a paper bag."

"Ah...okay."

"Sure enough, it's still hot."

Masanobu's hand that was starting to pull on his seat belt stopped, and he murmured slowly in a serious voice.

"Let's wait a minute for the AC to cool down. Cars at this time of year are the same as a steam bath."

He said with a frown, started the engine, and ran the air conditioning. Just as the air temperature inside the car started to slowly drop, the scent of delicious green tea floated in from somewhere.

"I have a weak spot for marketplace aromatics."

Quickly reading Wataru's expression, Masanobu smiled like he was exposing a secret.

"Then, you made this?"

"Not me, I had it made at a tea house I frequent. It's not like I can have a tea censer burning in here, you know?"

"...You're an interesting person, Asaka."

"Interesting...? You say a lot of unexpected things. Am I really that interesting?"

"Uh, I didn't say that to make fun of you or anything. How to put it...it's like, you figure things out

for yourself. And you're really curious and enthusiastic about how to create a comfortable environment."

So, maybe I'm comfortable being next to you, Wataru thought as he spoke. Maybe if he and Yuichi hadn't become lovers, he could have cultivated this kind of gentle friendship with him too.

"...Asaka."

"What's up?"

"I really am sorry about what happened. I'm an outsider, and I got emotional at your work site."

When Wataru hung his head meekly, Masanobu shook his own while smiling.

"You don't have to worry about it. I think anyone would find it upsetting to hear something about their lover they didn't know from someone else."

"Oh...yeah."

"Wataru, wasn't it the same before? When you had a fight and didn't see him for a while, Kazuki started having fun with the group and it really shocked you."

"....."

Come to think of it, that had happened. Then, too, Masanobu had comforted him, and Wataru had been able to escape self-loathing.

"I don't think Kazuki kept quiet this time because you're unreliable or young or anything like that. So, I don't think you really need to dwell on it."

"I hope you're right..."

"Really, I think you're an adult."

Hearing that asserted with a confident voice, naturally even Wataru couldn't suppress a wry smile.

"Asaka, no jokes..."

"It's not a joke. The other night, you didn't me anything. You know, the night I invited you to concert."

"Eh..."

"Normally, controlling my expression is simple. But...that day, it didn't work at all. I was aware of it but I didn't want to be alone, either... I was in a bind."

With an apparently self-deriding smile on his face, Masanobu quietly averted his eyes from Wataru. As if coloring the silence that suddenly fell, the fragrant scent of tea danced faintly on the tips of their noses.

"Asaka...?"

"...The concert I invited you to, I had actually gone to with her every year, even after we weren't lovers anymore...because we were good friends."

"By 'her' you mean..."

"Yeah. The girl I told you about before that. She dated since high school. Her name was Yuina."

"....."

Until then she had only existed in a 'story' but knowing her name started to make her real. Not knowing what to say, Wataru just kept quiet and looked at Masanobu's profile.

"Didn't I tell you? That band usually comes to Japan earlier in the year. Last year I went with Yuina, and that was the last time. A little while after that, she died in a car accident."

As if leaning on the steering wheel, Masanobu quietly gazed straight ahead. Spreading out beyond the windshield was a clear night sky suggesting beautiful weather tomorrow.

"...This year, the group's Japanese visit was delayed, and their schedule was all out-of-whack. Because of that, they could only do one performance in Tokyo. Yes, the day we went. That day was also the anniversary of Yuina's death."

"Anniversary..."

"To be truthful, I bought tickets for two and planned on going to the concert alone. It was ironic fate, but I figured I'd spend it with Yuina. Then, the day before when I was visiting her grave...I couldn't handle it anymore."

"So, you called me...?"

"Yeah, that's right."

The night coloring his eyes, Masanobu once again fell silent. There was nothing in his conversational tone that betrayed the presence of tragic thoughts. All that could be heard was Masanobu's calm, kind voice.

"It's not that just anyone would do."

He said, as if speaking to himself.

"I was happy that you came, Wataru."

"No way..."

"It's true. I parade around quite a bit. I'm someone who never wants to show a gloomy face in front of people... Somehow, I end up relaxing when I'm with you. It's strange."

The mood of his smile which had been crooked changed into one filled with a sense of clarity, one befitting the "Masanobu Asaka" everyone knew.

As-always frustrated by not knowing what to say, Wataru nonetheless felt relieved in his heart and sank deeply into the seat.

"I guess things got a little heavy."

"No, it's okay..."

"I know. Why don't you look at the reference books? I hope they're something you can use."

Raising his upper body off the steering wheel, Masanobu completely returned to his old self and changed the subject. Wataru reached out to the paper bag with his right hand and tried pulling out a suitable book.

"Whoa, English grammar. Wonder if I can handle it?"

"Wataru, you're not that good at English, are you? That's why I focused on English in choosing the texts. You seem to be scoring high enough in physics and math."

"That's correct..."

The well-used reference book had its cover properly attached, as would be expected of Masanobu, an honor student. A glimpse through the contents revealed nothing that looked familiar and Wataru suddenly felt anxious that it was at too high a level.

"...Hey, Wataru."

"Eh?"

"I thought about it a little, and until you're used to those reference books, want me to watch over your studies?"

"....."

Maybe it showed on his face.

That for an instant doubt went through his mind and Wataru ended up delaying his answer.

"Well? Or would that be a bother?"

"Uh, um, no...you don't need to..."

"I wouldn't worry if I were you. Didn't I tell you before? Thanks to you, I managed to make it through Yuina's death anniversary. I want to do something to thank you."

"But... "

Naturally, Wataru hesitated. He certainly feared that he wouldn't be able to understand the books well enough to use them, but if he spent any more personal time with Masanobu, it seemed inconsiderate of Yuichi's feelings.

"Thank you for the offer. But, I will do what I can on my own."

"Wataru..."

"Besides, I haven't done anything for you. I wanted you to cheer up, but I couldn't think of any clever words of comfort."

Somehow forming a smile, Wataru let his gaze fall to the book in his hands. If he relied on someone before he even got started, he really would be a miserable person. He had grown a little timid, but he thought that he needed to stand up on his own for this.

"I really am thankful for the reference books. I'll be sure to use them well."

Saying this, Wataru again tried flipping through the pages. Seeing markings in red pen and memos brought forth an image of Masanobu at that time, and for some reason it made him feel like smiling.

...However.

"Wataru? Something wrong?"

"....."

"Wataru...?"

Doubtful of Wataru suddenly not moving, Masanobu spoke up.

"Wataru... "

"Ah. I-I'm sorry. I...!"

The moment it seemed like his face was being peered at, Wataru came back to life. He hurriedly tried to pull away, but not much distance was possible in the small car interior, and in an instant Masanobu had a hold of him.

"Why...?"

Then Wataru grew silent.

"Wataru, why.....?"

"....."

Tears blurred Wataru's darkened eyes.

The trembling drops barely refused to spill out, but there was no hiding them in the soft light.

"What the...?"

Unsettled by the suddenness, Masanobu let his gaze rove around, seeking the reason. Then, Wataru's eyes fastened on the small characters written on the inside cover of the book he'd been innocently flipping through.

"Let's both do our best on exams. Yuina."

"This is... "

A message left, as if hidden.

Even Masanobu, the owner, hadn't realized such a thing was there.

"Yuina... "

"It...it's nothing, nothing. I'm sorry. Studying so much has made my eyes..."

While making a lame excuse, Wataru tried to quickly return the book to the paper bag. Masanobu took his arm even faster than he could speak.

"Asaka...thank you."

With a murmur that verged on vanishing, Wataru found himself in a tight embrace. The affectionate warmth somehow had a sad, nostalgic tone to it.

"Wataru, thank you..."

The slightly hoarse words carried with them the sound of Masanobu's sadness. Wataru sighed, and slowly let the tension out of his body.

The dark night dyed colors all the more, and in the window only shadows of themselves were seen.

Talk about weak and helpless...thought Wataru, as he again grew silent within Masanobu's embrace.

Wataru collapsed onto his bed after returning home and stared at the ceiling while muttering to himself. He had complained such many times until now, but tonight was the first time he had been at this much of a loss.

"...thank you."

When he calmed down a little, Masanobu's voice came back to his ears. Whatever the situation, there was no changing the fact that he'd been hugged by him.

"Kazuki...I'm sorry..."

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

When he saw the secretly written message, Wataru's chest had hurt terribly. If Masanobu had noticed it, he probably wouldn't have brought it with

him. The moment he thought He doesn't know, the tears automatically welled up within him.

"Wataru, thank you..."

Masanobu's words were in response to Wataru's tears. He was probably feeling miserable, and was thankful that Wataru was sad enough for both of them. That was what that embrace meant; nothing more, nothing less.

Reserved Wataru could hardly remember crying in front of anyone. The one exception was Yuichi, but he got made fun of as much as possible for it. Even so, it was all he could do before to keep the tears from spilling. It was a first-time experience for him, even Wataru was surprised by it.

"Kazuki..."

No matter how much he apologized in his heart, the feeling that he had betrayed Yuichi would go away. But, he couldn't be open about it if his life depended on it. It wasn't exactly a good thing that he had kept quiet about his involvement with the circle.

"But, I'm seeing him tomorrow..."

Wataru muttered to himself, forcing his life back together. He hadn't had the courage to check, perhaps Yuichi had tried to contact him. He had been saying how the two of them would go out somewhere for the first time in so long.

"Sorry, Kazuki..."

Worrying over this and that, he again felt like crying. Wataru stared dimly at the wall, wondering what kind of expression he'd meet Yuichi with.

Just then, there was a sudden knock at the door.



and his little sister Karin called out "Wataru..." in a strangely nervous way.

"What is it, Karin?"

"Well, you have a visitor..."

"Visitor?"

"Yeah. Uh...behind me..."

"Huh...?"

"He's standing right behind me."

Karin's voice grew steadily softer, and Wataru got up to see what was going on. But the moment he started towards the door, he was startled to a standstill.

"...Wataru. Can I come in?"

"Ka..."

That was all he could say.

Karin left as if running for it, and Wataru confronted Yuichi through the opened door. When he saw the cold gaze and stern expression, he couldn't understand why Karin ran for cover so quickly.

"K-Kazuki, uh...why...?"

"We need to talk."

Speaking in a blunt tone, Yuichi glared in that direction. Wataru didn't know what was going on, but all he could do was keep quiet and nod.

"Kazuki, your job..."

"I asked a coworker to trade break times with me. So, I'll head back in twenty minutes."

Answering the question bluntly, Yuichi stepped back and leaned against the wall. The room was suddenly wrapped in an oppressive air, and Wataru no longer knew what to say. Though he'd mentioned there wasn't much time, Yuichi didn't try very hard to get to the point.

All Wataru knew was just one thing.
Yuichi's mood was the pits.

"Listen, Kazuki..."

"You're lucky both your parents work."

"Huh?"

"Because if they saw me now, the "honor student upperclassman" image I worked so hard to build would be ruined."

After the line ringing of cynicism, Yuichi unfolded his arms and approached. Wataru unconsciously stepped back, and sat down when the bed stopped him.

"Kazuki..."

Being looked down upon at close range, Wataru squarely intercepted the intense gaze. The reason he didn't avert his eyes was that his bad premonition was gradually changing into a certainty. No way! He hoped and tried to deny it, but he couldn't think of any other reason for Yuichi to be this angry.

"...I got an email."

Perhaps he grasped Wataru's resignation, but Yuichi finally started to speak.

"It's from someone in Asaka's club. We're in the same department, and we see each other fairly regularly. He told me because he's worried about you as my underclassman. You were with Asaka in the parking lot for a long time, weren't you? And now that I've said that much, can you guess the rest?"

"Someone...was watching."

I knew it, sighed Wataru. The work site and parking lot were close to each other, and it wasn't strange that someone from the circle would have seen them.

"What's the meaning of it?"

"....."

"Don't keep quiet, explain it to me. Why were you and Asaka...?"

"I don't know what it said in the email, but it says that Asaka and I were hugging, that's true. anything beyond that was written, it's a lie."

"Say what...?"

When Wataru stated it plainly, there was a faint tinge of trembling in Yuichi's eyes. However, there was no point in offering poor excuses now.

"I'm really sorry to worry you. But, I don't feel even a shred of guilt over this. I think it was stupid to do something that would be misunderstood, but my hugging Asaka doesn't mean what you think it means..."

"Then, what does it mean?!"

Yuichi's voice suddenly grew fierce, and he grabbed both of Wataru's shoulders violently. His chest hurt intensely at this seldom-seen infuriated display.

Kazuki...sorry...

Yuichi didn't have such a short fuse that he would come running after one unconfirmed email. He had come here as quickly as possible seeking words of denial. In that case, even if it was a lie, Wataru wanted to respond in-kind.

However...

"Why is it...?"

The questioning voice was trembling a little.

"Why would you, with him...?"

"Because...Asaka's..."

Wataru hurriedly swallowed the words he had

started to say. If he told Yuichi, it would be stepping too far into Masanobu's privacy. He very much wanted to explain the situation, but his own discretion would not allow him to be open about it.

"Asaka's...what?"

"N-Nothing. Sorry, I can't really explain it. But, I really..."

"What the hell!"

Wataru had tried to stand up from the bed, but was unexpectedly pushed back down with strong force. Before he could resist he was held down, and before he knew it there was Yuichi's face before his eyes.

"Kazuki...?"

"Say it. What you were about to say."

"What I...I wasn't..."

The sinister eyes pierced through him mercilessly. But Wataru could not say anything. At least if Yuichi had heard about this tomorrow, he might have been able to deal with it a little more calmly. There might also have been a chance to consult with Masanobu and explain it in a way so as not to cause misunderstanding for Yuichi.

But, it was now too late for that. There was no changing the truth that hurt Yuichi.

"...Why're you keeping quiet about this?"

Still, Yuichi pressed his question. Even though he knew he wouldn't get an answer, he had to do it. It was precisely because he was aware of that complication that Wataru found it harder and harder to say:

Kazuki...sorry...

In comparison, the pain in his chest was a very

trivial thing. Wataru thought that the crime of finding out by rumor, the worst way, ran deeper than own reticence.

"Hey...what are you looking at?"

"Eh..."

"Even though I'm here in front of you, why you that troubled look on your face? Wataru, are you what you're looking at? Am I wrong?"

"....."

"Don't you look away!"

"Kazuki...!"

After the words that felt like they'd been hurt their lips met by force. Wataru unconsciously tried to escape, but as he was held down that was impossible. Even Yuichi's weight, always a pleasant thing, was as heavy as a heartless stone.

"Ka...zuki...!"

From beneath the wild, disordered breath Wataru called out to him as if entreating. That beloved name in the world to him was a spell that could forgive everything. No matter how absurdly Yuichi acted, he could accept it. That was what the spell was for.

"Hn...!"

A fire hotter than passion dwelt in the compressed lips. Yuichi's sighs drenched down to the heart and Wataru transmitted the moist heat through his mouth. He accepted countless kisses, and even for a moment who he was at one point. The only things he was sure of were Yuichi's warmth and the sighs falling onto his lips.

"Oo...! Nn..."

When their lips parted just a little, the sweet timbre overflowed from them. The forcefully entwined tongues reacted to the sound and once again held Wataru at bay.

Deep and shallow. Strong and weak. At first it was just a violent kiss, but before they knew it, like music played by a skilled virtuoso, it changed into a loving caress. Controlled by the captivating action, Wataru was enthralled by Yuichi until the temperature of his overflowing sighs took on a life of its own.

"Kazuki...can't...breathe...!"

At last Wataru made a sound, and the tears blurring the corners of his eyes were licked off. His lips, finally released, still basked in Yuichi's heat, and he couldn't even generate any words.

"...It's time."

Speaking again in an unexpectedly calm voice, Yuichi slowly drew himself away. Even the hint of the kiss didn't remain in his painful expression.

"Kazuki, I..."

With feelings like they'd been left behind, Wataru sluggishly got up. Yuichi stopped with his hand on the doorknob, and with his back turned said:

"If you don't feel guilty at all..."

"Uh..."

"...then make me believe it."

"....."

His voice betrayed that he was disgusted at himself for letting jealousy force his actions. As a sense of wrongdoing settled in Wataru's chest, Yuichi quietly walked out of the room.

"Sorry...sorry, Kazuki..."

Left alone, Wataru repeated "sorry" over and over. Tears spilled down his face, but he didn't even realize that he was crying.

He tried ringing the doorbell several times, but there was no sign of anyone coming.

"That's weird..."

After checking the time on his watch, Wataru sighed loudly. Yuichi should have gotten off work some time ago, so it was unlikely that he still hadn't come home.

"Or else, maybe...he's still mad."

Last night, after they parted awkwardly, Wataru didn't contact him at all. Maybe he had to work long hours because of the extended break, but Wataru still couldn't help but feel anxious. He had waited until morning and then resolutely visited the apartment, but with Yuichi not home, it was pointless.

"And his cell's been going to voice mail since last night..."

For a short time he was lost in thought about what to do, but he couldn't stand there spacing out forever. He took out his spare key, and decided to go inside. He felt some resistance to letting himself in, but he wanted to talk to Yuichi today no matter what.

"What gives, Wataru? You a sneaky thief?"

"K-Kazuki!"

"With you stooped over looking into the entryway, anyone would find that legitimate suspicious."

Hearing something as contradictory as "legitimately suspicious" left Wataru with a complex look on his face, and having been walked up on without realizing it somehow made him unpleasantly sense the distance between them.

"Come inside."

Yuichi spoke bluntly while taking his sneakers off in the entryway. The silver ring shone on his finger, and just discovering that calmed Wataru's anxiety considerably.

"Did you go to a convenience store or something?"

"If I went shopping, why'd I come back empty-handed? I had some business to attend to."

"Hmm..."

At the non-informative answer, Wataru completely ran out of things to say. Yuichi took the air conditioner remote and muttered, "Looks like another hot day." He was obviously fed-up.

"It was five in the morning when I got home. Even so, just when I was going to take a shower and go to sleep I got frigging called back out. Thanks to that I haven't slept at all."

"Who called you back out?"

"Isn't that obvious? Asaka."

"Asaka...?"

"Yeah. Apparently he called me a lot since last night, but I was at work the whole time."

Yuichi tossed the remote aside, and sat down on the edge of the bed like he always did. Wataru drew up both his knees and sat on the floor, and with his back

against the bed looked up at him.

"You know..."

"Hm?"

"Um, that is..."

Unable to find the words very well, in the end he said no more. Yuichi didn't bother to urge him, and while an uncomfortable silence continued.

But, at this point Wataru didn't know why he came over. When he stirred up his courage and raised his head again, his gaze unexpectedly met Yuichi's. The two stayed that way without stirring an inch, staring at each others' eyes.

It felt like a long time had passed, but in reality it hadn't even been one minute.

"Kazuki, I..."

"Why don't you come up?"

"Wha?"

"It's hard to talk if our eyes are on different levels."

Yuichi offered his left hand, which Wataru timidly took and stood up. The expression that indicated a bad mood also seemed to lose its severity the instant their fingertips touched.

"...I'm sorry about yesterday."

Yuichi spoke haltingly while facing forward. Wataru sat down.

"I was tired from being so busy, and then a rumor about you arrived in an email. The blood went to my head, and... Well, I can't even believe the way I acted. Afterwards I thought about it, and felt like I calmed down a little...but..."

"You're not at fault, Kazuki."

"At fault or not, I was out of line."

Seeing him muttering so reluctantly, and wincing at the timing, Wataru wound up smiling. He stiffened his expression, but Yuichi didn't get

"I'm really sorry you had to hear a nasty rumor. Our places been reversed, I think I would've gotten it too. I'm...sorry, Kazuki."

"It's all right, already."

"But I want to apologize."

Unconsciously grasping his arm, Wataru pleaded earnestly. Yuichi looked back with a slightly bewildered expression, but before long he sighed in resignation.

"Really, it's okay. I've been apologized to this morning! It's kind of like I'm the one being mean to people."

"All this morning?"

"I told you before: I got called out by Asaka. I was worried. He said something about feeling bad because things were weird between you and me because of something careless he did..."

"Then, he talked about the rumor..."

He thought it was a little strange, but Wataru unthinkingly moved by Masanobu's actions. Once he heard the rumor, he must have blamed himself. That's why he came to explain to Yuichi early in the morning.

"He took the initiative."

Looking sidelong at the now cheerful Wataru's expression, Yuichi said amusingly.

"Initiative...?"

"He offered to be your tutor. He said he quickly turned down, though."

"Oh...of course. I could never take advantage of him like that. Besides, that rumor started, too..."

"...Wataru, this and that are two different things."

Completely changing the tone of his voice, Yuichi aimed a serious look in this direction.

"If he's thinking of your welfare, Asaka will make for the ideal tutor, at least for right now. I can't make any time thanks to work, and isn't the next exam going to be severe?"

"Well....."

"I've decided on my answer. There's only a few days until the exam. If that's all, I'll put up with Wataru, let Asaka help you with studying."

"Are you...serious?"

Surprised at the unexpected words, Wataru looked long and hard back into Yuichi's eyes.

"I mean, you hate the guy..."

"Shut up."

With the rest of his words stopped by a sudden kiss, Wataru was completely dumbfounded. The sound of their lips parting naturally put a smile on both of their faces.

"I only said I'd put up with it."

Yuichi repeated in a high and mighty tone.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm mad about both Asaka and the rumor in as much as you wouldn't explain it. But, right now getting your exam scores up is the priority. Right?"

"Kazuki..."

"However, I can only put up with so much, so ten days is all I'll agree to. I emphasized that much to Asaka, too. Well, with him that's probably enough to produce results."

"Aren't I the one studying?"

"Of course. And how much do you think I studied so I could finally sleep with you? It's your turn. Good luck."

"Oh, right..."

Like Yuichi said, the first time they were together was decided by his results on the nationwide mock exam.

His results were an admirable rank of 27th nationwide, but Wataru knew how fiercely he had studied to achieve it.

"...Yeah. I don't know if I can do something inhuman like that...but I'll try hard, too. And Asaka's going to the trouble of helping me."

"Only for ten days."

At being reminded again firmly, Wataru burst into laughter. No matter how grand a face he made, even Yuichi was filled with jealousy and anxiety inside. But, if he had declined Masanobu's proposal out of a petty desire for monopoly, he would have had to recognize himself as a narrow-minded man.

"Could this have been what you meant by the initiative being stolen?"

"More or less. I told you, Asaka's quite the schemer. Even though you refused him as a tutor because of me, he saw through it. He really is a creep."

"Kazuki...come on now..."

He had this sulky an attitude now, but surely front of Masanobu he had maintained his composure. That scene was easy to imagine, and Wataru could help but find it funny.

"...Don't laugh."

Yuichi slid into a rare, sulky tone.

"If you laugh, won't you destroy the mood?"

"Mood...?"

"The weather is so nice, it's cool in here, and we have the day off to-boot. And don't forget, the two of us are about to not see each other for ten days."

"Ka..."

"With all these conditions lined up, don't you think it'd be a waste to spend the day just laughing?"

"Kazukiii..."

Yuichi was happily gazing at Wataru, who was totally drained of strength. He knew that no matter how cool a face he showed him, in the end he couldn't resist against the temptation.

"At least...at least."

"Ah?"

"You'd better close the curtains..."

Wataru's frail resistance was scattered away as Yuichi as he burst into laughter.

"Promise me," Yuichi had said to Wataru. Not to take his own clothes off...

To control his voice as little as possible...

"Yeah...it really does seem like that's what I told the first time..."

Wataru laughed in his pinned-down position while pushing Yuichi's disarrayed forelocks aside with his fingertips.

"It's like I've always been bound by those words."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Yuichi's action of unfastening his buttons one by one was tantalizing, and Wataru tried adding his own fingers to the mix. Then, he stared back with emotions that could not be put into words.

"Wataru..."

His desire must have won out, as Yuichi nimbly undid the rest of the buttons, then without a single mean word visited his lips upon Wataru's now bare skin.

Perhaps it was because they were together in a brightly lit room, but as Wataru kept his eyes closed scenes of their first such encounter came to mind and then vanished over and over. How many times had he made love to Yuichi this way since then? He had exposed a face no one knew, and uttered a voice that even he himself hadn't known. He had the feeling that each time the familiar bodies melted together this way, the density increased.

"It was...evening then."

"Yeah, that's right. I remember."

Capturing the edges of his chest with moist lips, Yuichi smiled while nibbling sweetly. Sensing this, Wataru imitated him and smiled himself in order to dissipate the last remaining bit of guilt.

"Nn...!"

At the caresses of the protruding tongue, the

places that received sweet bites at that point go strongly exhilarated. While kissing the left and right his chest with a vexing degree of care, Yuichi touched Wataru's cheek with his right hand.

Wataru moistened the palm of that hand with a long breath, and a stealthy, pleasant feeling bubbled inside him. As if a part of his bared body had suddenly awakened, he found what Yuichi's fingers always made him feel.

"Ah...! Ah...ah."

A voice with no meaning found expression, but the original promise was kept. Even so, his heart had been governed by anxiety today, so he wanted to catch out a stronger sensation than usual. Pain would do, nor did he mind pleasure. If it was something Yuichi controlled, Wataru wanted to take all of it in.

Driven on by the tantalizing feeling, Wataru stretched out his right hand. While feeling relief at being able to perceive the sign of lust even through layers of clothing, Wataru ignored Yuichi's bewilderment and without hesitation slid his hand into his clothing.

"...That in the way?"

Asking seriously in an excited voice, Yuichi's eyes were colored with a faint tinge of red. This was because even though they had been together many times, Wataru had hardly ever taken the initiative.

"It is...but..."

His tone suggested hesitancy, but his voice was already gone sweetly husky.

The relieved Wataru let his fingers creep over Yuichi rather excited Yuichi, loving the warmth.

While entrusting himself to Wataru's fingers, Yuichi kissed the damp skin hard enough to leave marks. Licked until it was like being ravished down to his cells, Wataru had to stop his fingers many times due to the pleasure.

"It's kind-of...funny."

"Eh...?"

"It's a little late, but I'm oddly embarrassed."

Yuichi spoke with a wry smile, but his eyes were thrillingly sexy. Wataru felt his pulse quicken, and secretly complained in his heart, Don't say it with that face.

They separated briefly, and nimbly threw the rest of their clothes off onto the floor. As their skin overlapped pleasantly, Wataru gently ran his hands over Yuichi's smooth back.

"Ah..."

"What's wrong?"

"Sorry. I took my own clothes off."

"...Idiot."

Yuichi slid his fingertips in a streamlined fashion from nape to shoulder blade. His moist skin already sensitive to the point of pain, Wataru let the indirect caresses pass over him as they tantalized him.

"...It feels like today...maybe I can't wait."

"Yeah...me neither..."

Nodding with a sigh, wanting even just a little to experience Yuichi, Wataru drew his own body in close. Even though he wasn't completely agitated enough, the lascivious heat had already raised his temperature.

The voice flooding from his throat was as sweet

as honey, and each time Yuichi kissed him, like magic, the sound that scattered snatched away reason. Yuichi's rising heart rate made his body, shivering from pleasure, throb even more, and the fact that he couldn't say "I love you" vexed Wataru more than anything.

"Kazuki...uh..."

As if the sudden voice had been expected, Wataru naturally invited a slightly rueful smile from Yuichi. But, the desire lurking in the sound definitely seeped through to him.

"Wataru..."

Words were no longer necessary.

Yuichi slowly stood one of Wataru's legs and carefully positioned himself in the opened space. Shivering in delight at being violated, Wataru ushered him in with his entire body.

When he tried opening his slightly closed eyes, he could tell that his expression was coloring bit by bit. Wataru very much liked that rarely-seen face. Before long, his body shook greatly, like it was being toyed with by waves, and a sweet numbness ran through him over and over. Played with by those waves made by Yuichi, Wataru's lips forgot to close and continually gasped.

Wataru pushed himself up higher, and when he emitted all of the heat, at almost the same time Yuichi met with his climax. Loving the weight added up on his own body, Wataru once more closely embraced Wataru back.

"You know what..."

His slightly heightened breathing moistened Wataru's skin.

"I love the way you love, Wataru."

"Wha!"

"...It's tender. It feels really good."

"N-Now hold on..."

"Hn?"

"Uh...thanks..."

Not thinking of any other words, Wataru answered in a vanishing voice. Maybe Yuichi found that response to be very funny, as he loudly burst out laughing.

On top of the crumpled sheets the wet bodies intertwined, as bare as they were the days they were born.

And the timbre that resounded through the room was calm, bright and cheerful.

"I'm happy you accepted, Wataru. I was a little worried that I'd acted too forward. But, now I think the weird rumors will go away too. I went ahead and told everyone that I'm helping you with your exam studying anyway."

"Oh...thank you very much for your help."

Somewhat stressed-out, Wataru bowed his head. He'd gained Yuichi's strong recommendation, and in the end it worked out that Masanobu would tutor him for ten days.

"Even if it's just ten days, it'll be rough."

The voice whispering that as he left Yuichi's apartment last night still lingered in his ears. Their rendezvous next weekend had just been put on-hold.

"I made it out that what happened in the parking

lot was me encouraging you, since you were worried about exam scores. I'm not confident about how much everyone believed me, but it seems logical overall."

"As long as it doesn't cause any problems for you, that's fine. Kazuki even bragged that until the exam is over he would leave me alone."

"I see. Sounds like him."

Wataru came to want to knock out the doctor he had had for some time over Masanobu, who was grinning in front of him. When he thought back on it there was no helping how it was mysterious from the start.

"Uh...Asaka..."

"Yes?"

"Why are you going this far to help me? I had even approached Kazuki directly about becoming a tutor..."

"Like I said, it's my thank-you for becoming a doctor. Because you were with me, I was able to quietly pass Yuina's death anniversary. It may seem like a trivial thing, but you really bailed me out."

"....."

Was that really all it was?

Unable to follow the dicey topic too far, Wataru fell silent. But, ever since Masanobu had called him a "hero of justice as far as Wataru is concerned," he had been one by one done and said revealing things. Going to Yuichi had been the first time he had gone out on a limb and it didn't seem like he would go that far simply to express thanks.

But...maybe it's me that's unconsciously

excessive...

When Wataru threw a quick, reserved glance his way, he must have noticed it because he returned a grin. Perhaps it was something he asked that coaxed that smiling face out.

"Um, then..."

"Yes."

"Why are we studying in a cafe? I even cleaned up my room."

That was true.

He had squeezed all of his prep school lectures into the duration of the morning so that he had the afternoon open to study with Masanobu, but the designated place was the old cafe that he used to stop in with Yuichi on his way home from school. It calmed him that the spot was run by a relaxed old couple, but he never even dreamed that he would casually sip tea while learning English grammar.

"Besides, isn't this the place where I first encountered you? You even cleaned for me. I'm sorry about that."

"No, my sister... When she heard about you, she got all hyper and worked-up. She said not to let someone as cool as that into a dirty room..."

"So you have a sister, Wataru. Kawamura mentioned that, come to think of it. He said you look a lot alike."

Peering at Wataru's opened English notebook, Masanobu opened his mouth as if to continue chatting.

"Well, for starters why don't you try punctuating that parallel sentence structure the way you think it

should be?"

"Pardon?"

What Masanobu indicated was a short sentence of just three lines. Simply seeing it made Wataru panic as his head began to spin.

"Asaka, uh..."

"Calm down, Wataru. Okay, first let's have some tea and gossip about somebody or something. Between you and your sister, which one of you holds a strong position in the house?"

"...Karin, of course."

"Why?"

"Because both of my parents work, and I cook."

Wondering if they should be completely ignored, the parallel sentence structure, Wataru talked to himself and Karin like he was asked. After listening briefly, Masanobu smiled elegantly while saying, "right, let's render each of the differences between you and Karin in English."

"Lastly, collect that all into one sentence. I'll teach you how to do that as we go."

"All of that just now?!"

"The important thing is that you remember to break it down. After that, it won't be so simple. From there on, it's about how much vocabulary and how many idioms you know."

"Uhh..."

"Wataru, have more confidence. It's about assembly and breaking it down. A very simple problem, no?"

"I...guess you're right."

While drinking delicious black tea and hearing it relayed like mere chit-chat, Wataru gradually started to feel confident, too.

Masanobu had the conversational art called "Asaka magic," and Wataru remembered the members of the circle talking about him giving the impression he could resolve any subject by talking through it.

That's sure the case this time...

While admiring him from the bottom of his heart, Wataru once more tackled the English sentence. Each time he stumbled, Masanobu skillfully encouraged him, and carefully explained highlighted points. It was precise and without excess, and even his pronunciation was enthrallingly beautiful.

"My, my, students work so hard."

The cafe's old couple was gazing at them amusedly. The husband was a secret Yuichi fan, so he was a little disappointed to find out that Wataru's companion was a different young man, but he was happy because Masanobu was his third favorite.

"I wonder what kind of tea they'll order next."

Looking forward to the additional order, she smiled at her husband at the counter.

Wataru didn't know this, but the second favorite after Yuichi was, naturally, himself.

Over the next week, studying with Masanobu continued smoothly. His teaching style was unique, so every day was a series of surprises for Wataru. Their meeting places were truly diverse: a hall in an art gallery, an aquarium lobby, or maybe a bookstore his friend ran.

"Where we study doesn't change the basic structure of English sentences. However, it's best to experience expressions and words you should remember in everyday settings. First, you need to stop thinking that you're bad at English. Then, your understanding will deepen naturally. Don't worry; I'll be sure to do exam-taking techniques into you, too."

Today, the two of them had come to the gallery that the "Renovation Research Society" had formerly worked on. The second floor had become a cafe where they sat facing each other as Wataru listened keenly to Masanobu's words.

Looking at him this way, Asaka really did resemble how Kazuki used to be.

There were tender actions that happened at unexpected times, matched with an upbeat atmosphere that naturally enlivened his counterpart. That so coincided exactly with Wataru's favorable impression towards Yuichi when first seen from a distance. Yuichi had, as an honor student, gotten to know Wataru without showing his true, stubborn side, what kind of relationship would they have had?

It's because I'm thinking like this that Kawa said what he did to me...

With slightly bitter feelings, Wataru remembered what his best friend had said to him on the phone last night.

"I heard you asked Asaka to tutor you! So kind-of risky to me. Don't tell me you're mixin' him up with Kazuki."

"What're you talking about? I mean, they have ways in which they resemble one another."

from my perspective there's no way... In the first place, Kazuki recommended this. He said to let Asaka help me study."

"Of course he would, if it's him. It'd be uncool to say something obviously jealous like 'No way.'"

"....."

"Look. Back at the beginning, didn't Kazuki pick on you a lot?"

"Yeah..."

"You got mad...that he was nice to other people, but just not to you. Aren't the feelings canceled-out when you're with Asaka?"

Wataru was at a loss for words, and couldn't come up with a single rebuttal. This was because he couldn't totally deny the possibility.

Maybe...it's true...

While drinking iced tea, he looked over English language articles Masanobu had chosen from a magazine one after another. Even though something else was going through his head, he had reached the point where he understood barely half of it. As was declared, his sense of incompetence was decreasing daily, and in that way Masanobu's contribution was impressively high.

Kazuki's officially recognized how good Asaka is. And he's still putting up with this, even now. I can't let that support go to waste... Yeah, I've got to try hard...

"Hey, how's Kazuki doing?"

"Wha..."

Suddenly Masanobu changed the subject to Yuichi. Precisely because he had been thinking of him so much, Wataru was surprised, as if his heart had been

seen through.

"I, I think he's doing well. There weren't emails from him yesterday, but until the day before yesterday we were in-touch every day."

"Okay. Well, that's good then."

"Is something wrong?"

Hearing it put that way, he grew worried about the recent lack of contact. Every night he had a simple daily report email before going to bed, or had a short phone conversation, but last night there had been no word from Yuichi.

"Sometimes there are days like that, so I'm very concerned about it..."

"Ahh, sorry. What I said was pointless. Actually, about three days ago some girls from my class dropped by the cafe where Kazuki works...but it seemed he'd been off for some time."

"Off...?"

"Yeah. He wouldn't be back for another week or so seemed. It's just that he's popular with customers, so the shop feels like it's awaiting his return."

"....."

Yuichi had been off work for a long time.

Here he had been so enthusiastic about work, so what the heck had happened?

"Did you by chance not know?"

"....."

"...I see. But, Kazuki's a steady guy, so I think he's fine. It's three days until the mock exam, and he can go see him soon."

"Asaka... "

"You've toughed your way out through wanting to see him, and studied your heart out, right? If you let all that effort go to waste now, I'm sure he'd get angry."

Wataru's heart was pierced a little at Masanobu's words. He had certainly thought I'm trying hard for Kazuki too, but even Masanobu had spared his own time to be with him.

"You're...right. Kazuki isn't a child. Even if something's happened, he can look after himself."

To ease his anxiety, Wataru tried intentionally speaking cheerfully. Right now, he had a goal that he had to make his priority. It was an important step towards building a future with Yuichi.

"...Asaka."

"Hm?"

"Can you reword this sentence structure?"

Now that Wataru had refocused, he sat up straight in order to reorient himself psychologically. After three more days, he could see Yuichi. Then, he would embrace him enough to make up for all this anxiety.

"Ahh, you see this..."

While listening to Masanobu's explanation, Wataru re-vowed to himself to exert as much effort as he could.

"I'm donnne!"

Wataru got up deliberately from his chair and stretched with all his might. The students still at the testing site looked at him in a startled manner, but that didn't bother him one bit.

"Well, the real thing is still several months

away...but anyway, I made it through the mock exam.

He was even inspired to inconsiderately talk about himself.

During the exam, he never took off the ring that he served in place of a charm. As a reward today, he was finally getting to see the very person he'd wished to see.

"I guess summer vacation's over soon..."

It looked like this summer would end with school, weekend dates and studying. Still, just the thought that "weekend dates" had been included could make even an exam student a bright one. Kawamura seemed to have invited Mitsuki to a movie, but he was scolded. "You can't relax until after exams" and was downhearted about it.

"Um...it's 2:30 now, so...if I hurry, I can be at Kazuki's apartment by 3:00."

Wataru had tried many times to get in touch with Yuichi since he found out that he had been off work. His cell phone was off or the calls didn't get through, his replies to his emails had ceased, too. He tried calling the apartment phone as well, but the answering machine picked up every time.

"Although, he should of course know that today was the day of the mock exam."

There was plenty saved up over ten days that he wanted to talk about face-to-face. There were various problems that had been tabled that he wanted to calmly and properly discuss. If Yuichi really did have an interest in renovation, he wanted to hear about his feelings honestly.

"How should I explain...what happened..."

Asaka...?"

It probably was not a topic he could avoid, but it was a little tricky. It was obvious that Yuichi wouldn't grasp it as long as he wasn't told the reason, but that meant having to talk about Masanobu's past.

At this point, Yuichi probably wouldn't bring it up himself. He likely presumed that Wataru had no intention of bringing it up either, and all that had been conveyed to him was that there were no guilty feelings between Wataru and Masanobu. So in the end, all he said was "Make me believe it." Yuichi went without forcing the reason out of Wataru and harassing him over it. When he thought about how irritated he must feel, Wataru's heart was filled with regret.

"I don't want to be indifferent about it at this point..."

The one thing more important than anything to him was Yuichi. There really should not have been anything that would require causing him pain in order to protect it.

"...I guess I'll try asking Asaka whether it's okay to tell Kazuki. Whether I can explain everything when I see him today..."

Once he decided on this, a sense of readiness was born. He didn't know how Masanobu would answer, but that was something he could think about when it happened. In any case, if he didn't get the ball rolling, the situation wouldn't go anywhere.

While feeling a slight tension and a sense of liberation at the same time, Wataru walked outside the testing site.

"Ugh, I can't take this..."

Suddenly basking in the sullen heat, he grimaced and walked quickly towards the subway. He tried calling Yuichi's cell one more time for safety's sake, and it worked this time, but in the end switched over to the answering machine.

"Kazuki...what's going on...?"

Now that the test was over, he had looked forward to seeing him right away. That being the case, where had Yuichi disappeared to? Until yesterday he had been able to divert his attention with studying, but naturally right now his anxiety was growing.

"...All right. Then maybe I'll get in touch with Asaka first. I need to thank him for the exam too..."

While contemplating internally What a cold-hearted student, Wataru stopped in front of the stairs. But, before he took out his cell he caught sight of Masanobu himself coming up the stairs, unthinkingly doubted his own eyes.

"Asaka..."

"Good work finishing the test."

"You came here just for that?"

"To be precise, perhaps I'm Kazuki's substitute."

He laughed like it was a joke, but unfortunately for better or for worse, his timing was too perfect. If hiding complex feelings, Wataru quickly bowed and said, "Thank you very much."

"I was just thinking I would go see Kazuki now...so thank goodness we didn't pass each other. Uh, the test went well thanks to you. I'm thinking

probably get a better English score than I ever have."

"Good. Looks like I was of some use."

"...You're being too modest, Asaka."

"But, I'm the uninvited tutor."

Even under a blazing sun, Masanobu coolly wore a linen jacket without sweating a drop. That facet of him was exactly like Yuichi, Wataru thought to himself, and Masanobu quickly said, "And I'm sorry for this..." with a serious face.

"But before you go to see Kazuki, I wonder if I could have just a little of your time."

"Eh..."

"Wataru, you left something behind on-purpose at our last lesson. I thought I would return it."

"But, that's....."

Wataru recalled the "forgotten item" Masanobu was talking about, and all at once he felt awkward. Looking at that reaction in an exasperated way, Masanobu suddenly sighed.

"Wataru, don't be that way. If holding onto it is a burden, just say so."

"N...No! That's not what I meant. Uh...it's not that...it's..."

"Wataru?"

"You should have it, Asaka."

"....."

Having that much conviction at least, Wataru answered plainly. Even while his studies were being watched over, he had been concerned the whole time whether it was right for him to have it or not.

Now might have been a good time to break the

ice. Wataru went on ahead resolutely.

"I want to have Kazuki believe me. So, I want to explain to him fully about the rumor from the other day. Asaka, is it all right if I tell him about Yuina?"

"It's not easy to stand around talking in a place like this."

"Uh..."

"The store that will become our next project is nearby. Sorry, but could you come with me there? What you left behind is there, too."

"Asaka..."

He could sense a coerciveness that was usually there in how Masanobu kept emphasizing "forgotten" and "left behind." But, Wataru figured it was no surprise. If the item was at-hand, he would never be able to forget about Yuina. But he could not do something like get rid of it. In that case, thinking he could give it to someone who he could trust was probably a very natural thing.

But...that's not my job...

It was painful to put it in those terms, but it was the only choice for Wataru. Creating a secret between himself and Masanobu equated to betraying Yuina. That was the one thing he could never do. Precisely because he could not simply call Masanobu a friend, he could not avoid shortening the current distance between them.

If possible, it would be nice if he understood those feelings.

"...All right."

A response still hadn't come from Yuichi.

Wataru clutched the cell in his hand, and bowed after Masanobu as he walked away.

For a mere college club, there were many fine projects that Masanobu's research society took in. That was why everyone got hyped-up and into it nearly all of the jobs came down from Shohei.

"From a pro's standpoint, what we do really is on the level of helping out, like we're playing house. , because it's educational and, as free part-time work s, quite beneficial, I guess everyone wins."

While Masanobu explained, he led Wataru to small post office not five minutes on-foot from the ion they'd been at. It was currently closed, but he ned to have been given a key, since he opened the y door and smilingly said, "After you."

"It looks run-down, but it stays quite cool inside. for some reason I came to like it. It's my secret umer refuge."

"Will Shohei eventually do this remodeling, ?"

"Yeah. But, that's still to-come. He's been on an rseas business trip for a while."

Precisely because Masanobu called it a refuge, as'n't very dilapidated inside. Maybe not many days passed since it had closed.

Wataru felt a mysterious nostalgia in the xpectedly cool air. When he looked around at the oundings, there were two three-person sofas place on er side of the entrance. On top of the counter there remained stamp samples and "hometown parcel" mphlets, like they had come in for small-time treasure

hunting. When Wataru carelessly became engrossed, Masanobu said, "I'll go get what you left behind. Can you wait a bit?" and went up to the second floor to find a sign hanging from the ceiling that read "Save Insurance."

Sure enough, Asaka doesn't want to hold it himself... But, I have to make him understand I can either...

When he thought of all the kind of things Masanobu had done for him, a sense of selfishness and self-aborrence attacked Wataru. However, if he couldn't hurt someone else in order to protect something, he decided he would sooner become some kind of villain.

Still though, Asaka's taking a long time...

Maybe he got recklessly worked up, but he left behind alone made him gradually less and less concerned. In an effort to stay distracted, Wataru once more to look around the room.

There was a time in elementary school when he explored a vacant house with a friend and was scolded by his parents. But this place was not simply a vacant house; it was waiting for its time to be reborn. When he thought about how it would be renewed beautifully thanks to the group's work, Wataru somehow felt cheerful.

It's just like my ring...

The ring shining on his left ring finger...

The ring that was originally Yuichi's...

It had been lost multiple times, switched, but honestly he had thought he would never see it again more than once or twice. But, every time it came back

this finger, its dearness and beauty definitely increased.

Silverwork with a thin gold line in the center... The design is simple, and it really is a typical ring you'd find anywhere...

A miracle ring, into which Yuichi's secret wishes might have been put. As long as the rings adorned their fingers, they were unique treasures for the two of them.

Kazuki...

Through the cracked window, the bright afternoon sunlight came through. When Wataru lifted his left hand in the air and gazed at the ring, he yearned for Kazuki from the bottom of his heart.

Kazuki... Where could you be...?

Suddenly, loneliness took hold of his heart.

Even though he wanted to see his face right away, he didn't know where Yuichi was. Though it probably would not have hurt him to at least contact Wataru, not so much as an encouraging email had come in the night before the mock exam.

And I miss you...

Wataru brought his left hand slowly towards his lips. Previously, Yuichi had kissed Wataru's ring as a form of harassment, but now he had a feeling that he knew how sad he must have felt at that time.

I love you, Kazuki... I miss you...

Whispering in his heart, he softly kissed the ring. The next moment, he sensed someone catching their breath behind him, and he hurriedly turned around.

"Asaka..."

It seemed Masanobu had returned from the second floor at some point. The instant he realized he

had been watched, Wataru's whole body was wrapp
furious embarrassment.

"Ah, uh, I..."

"....."

"I...I'm sorry! I'm going home!"

"...Wait."

When he tried to rush past in front of Masan
his arm was grabbed with surprising strength. Star
Wataru stopped walking and tried to ask what the
deal was.

Masanobu's eyes drew in close.

The instant he discovered that that gaze, clo
with heat, was tinged with a slight jealousy, Wataru's
were sweetly occupied by his.

".....!"

The world and time stopped for a moment.

Not knowing what had happened, Wa
reflexively tried to struggle, but Masanobu would
allow it. Held even more tightly, not even given a cha
to resist; he was kissed many times more deeply.

"...U.....n...!"

His throat resounded with a swallowed
and a biting numbness emitted from where he had b
grabbed. The warmth from their overlaid lips
extremely tender, and it kept sweetly tempting Watar
abandon all reason.

However, that temperature was practica
totally different from the thing he loved. Wataru for
his stiffened body to move, and somehow made anot
effort to escape. Something about the kiss did not se
real, and his legs felt like they were floating in space,

he told himself that he could not lose here.

"A...saka...!"

Just as he became desperate and pushed back on his chest, trying to create even just a small opening, Masanobu's face suddenly became distorted with sadness. It was an emotional face, one he had never seen before. For an instant, Wataru forgot to resist, and stared wordlessly back at Masanobu.

"If it were me..."

Before long, while holding Wataru in his arms, a voice of pain leaked from him.

But in the end, whatever followed never took shape as sound. Losing his chance to continue his words, he bit his lip and became quiet in order to confine any unwanted sounds.

If it were me...

What words had Masanobu meant to follow that up with?

"...Ah."

Wataru made a small sound.

From its position sticking diagonally out of his bag, his cell began ringing.

Wataru softly separated from Masanobu's arms, and wordlessly retrieved the cell. As he anticipated, the name he cherished was blinking on the LCD.

"It's Kazuki..."

Feeling like he was about to cry, Wataru gazed at the cell and smiled warmly. Then he turned to look over his shoulder, said "Farewell...Asaka," and left the post office.

"Kazuki...eh...?"



Masanobu stood still for a while, and then slowly spoke. The "forgotten item" he had dropped when he embraced Wataru entered his field of vision, and he sensed it was condemning his own foolish act.

"Just when I think I want him...is it no use, Yuina...?"

He stared at the hands that had held Wataru, and asked the question with no answer.

As if waiting for an answer from his lover in the sky, he quietly shifted his gaze outside the window.

In the end, Wataru was unable to answer the phone.

He didn't have the courage to talk to Yuichi right away. After leaving the post office, he quickly turned off his cell, and for the time being thought of nothing but getting home.

"This time, I really can't offer any excuse..."

Even while walking down the road from the station to his home, his head was full of Yuichi. It wasn't the sweet image until a bit earlier, but instead nothing but his hurt face came to Wataru's mind and tortured him.

"Kazuki..."

Suddenly, as if by force, he stopped walking and silently gazed at his shadow stretching out on the asphalt.

"...Maybe it was like Kawamura said. I was...seeing the old Kazuki inside Asaka. So, I was comfortable being with him...and might have been unknowingly depending on him..."

Since he first met him, there had been something oddly enchanting about Masanobu. He was popular, and cool. He never came in second; he was a perfect person right out of a painting. Masanobu had with an adult composure the face that Yuichi had long ago abandoned.

"So...Kazuki, that's why you're so..."

At last, everything became visible to Wataru.

It was because it was Masanobu who was involved that Yuichi had become so distracted when he heard the rumor. No matter how much he said he believed, his emotions couldn't be restrained with a glossing-over. If Wataru loved Yuichi, confiding in Masanobu the same way was a natural outcome. Until now he had thought that the dislike stemmed from a simple matter of likes opposing, but the problem was as simple as that.

"I'm horrible..."

His chest throbbed with pain.

Wataru was shocked by his own naiveté, and was too ashamed to take a single step from where he stood.

How must Yuichi have felt, seeing Wataru so unthinking and defenseless with Masanobu? What more, the reason Wataru became emotionally attached to Masanobu was because he saw in him something similar to the Yuichi of the past. This reality, even Kawamura saw through, could never have gone unnoticed by Yuichi.

"Kazuki, you understood it all along..."

A deep sigh seemed to thoroughly rob Wataru of his willpower.

During the time "Yuichi Kazuki," famous for being kind to everyone, was cold to just one person, Wataru was very sad. If Yuichi had felt indebted for that time, he could not have annoyingly interfered with him seeing Masanobu. He could have been the only one who created the basis for it.

"I only said I'd put up with it."

His ever-arrogant tone was cool and distant. However, the Yuichi who had to say that had to have felt terribly conflicted deep in his heart.

Then, as he had feared, Wataru had been raided by Masanobu. There was a world of difference between being hugged sentimentally and being kissed. If Yuichi found out about it, this time no defense would likely stand up.

"What do I do...?"

No answer came to him.

Wataru couldn't lie to Yuichi, and he had no confidence that he could go on hiding it. But, he couldn't find the courage to soon see him and confess everything. He would try to withstand any amount of shock and scorn. But he could never withstand Yuichi feeling hurt that it was his own fault. He didn't know what Masanobu had in mind when he kissed him, but at least it didn't seem like he would do such a thing as a joke. In that case, it was clear that all the responsibility lay not with him, but with Wataru himself.

Wataru unconsciously wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He couldn't stop himself from rubbing hard over and over. But there was no way that that would get rid of Masanobu's warmth.

"Damn it...! Why...Why did I...?!"

He had betrayed Yuichi, and pushed Masanobu into a corner. He couldn't even imagine to atone for those crimes.

"Hey, it's him!"

As Wataru hung his head, suddenly an innocent lispig voice reached his ears.

"Hello, misterrr!"

"Eh..."

Lured by the innocent and familiar address, he nervously tried looking up. What entered his view was Takako energetically waving and being carried by Yuichi.

"Ka...Kazuki, and Takako...?"

"My, my. You finally found the missing Takako."

"Mm-hm!"

Yuichi was the one missing, Wataru thought for a moment, but when he considered it, Yuichi might have kept calling his cell after he turned it off.

"Geez... No matter how much I called you by voice mail, and even when I sent emails there was no reply. Are you trying to get revenge on me?"

Yuichi wasted no time in complaining and simply walked up and quietly set down Takako who was squirming now that she could see Wataru.

"Uh...why are you here...?"

"Why?" Are you feeling okay? This is near my parents' house."

"Huh?"

"Takako bugged me to go play with her in

park. At this hour, there are hardly any annoying kids around."

"Your parents' house...?"

After he ignorantly parroted Yuichi's words, Wataru hurriedly looked around again at the scenery. In the midst of the quiet residential area, what met his eyes to the right was a park with attached soccer grounds.

"Y-You're kidding... I've been walking forever trying to get to my own place..."

"Maybe you were lost in thought about something...that probably made you subconsciously want to see my face."

"....."

Normally, he would have retorted with something nasty like "jerk" at this point, but right now there was no way Wataru was in the mood.

Looking down as if to avoid Yuichi's gaze, Wataru wished he could leave as soon as possible. He certainly did want to see Yuichi, but he could not believe that he would wander into this neighborhood at a time like this. With his mood shifting so much, how in the world could he face him when he felt so ashamed?

But, unmindful of Wataru's mentality, Yuichi very lightheartedly called out "You can spend some time with Takako too."

"Look, she's taking off full speed for the swings. She's finally in a better mood, after seeing you."

"...I appreciate that, but I..."

"Don't refuse."

Suddenly Yuichi's voice became serious. Wataru looked back at him in surprise, and he unpleasantly

looked away to gaze far off at Takako.

"She said she wanted to see the man in the end and of course she's attached to you. Even though a guy is babysitting her, as soon as she started elementary school she got all picky with her tastes."

"Takako did....?"

If Yuichi wasn't good enough for her, just the kind of looks would she go for in the future? Yuichi had easily seen how Wataru was a little surprised a malicious smile crossed his face.

"How should I know? She's probably decided to be single forever after all."

"Wh-Why?"

"Because it's obvious that you're what she's interested in. It's sad, but however beautiful a woman she grows into, marriage is out of the question."

"....."

Catching on to the implied meaning, Wataru's face unknowingly turned red. Seeing this, Yuichi stood up and stooped over and peered into his eyes with a look.

"Wataru, sorry for falling out of contact."

"Kazuki..."

"Takako's calling, so let's head over to the car. Then I'll explain everything."

"Uh, but..."

Troubled, Wataru hesitated to say it. If it came up to him, talking to Yuichi was the last thing he wanted to do. Being with him made him feel painfully guilty and hearing his voice made him feel so sad he thought he would cry. If he saw that face, even Yuichi would

probably ask the reason why.

"Let's go, Wataru. C'mon."

"Ah..."

Taking the bewildered Wataru's hand by force, Yuichi started walking steadily. At this point, there was no opposing him. He decided that even if he delayed, he would eventually be found out, so Wataru walked with heavy steps to near where Takako was on a swing.

"Mister, where'd you go?"

Swinging her legs high, Takako talked to Wataru while swinging.

"I went to take a test. I'm studying to become a college student."

"Hmm... Takako's dad and mom went to America."

"America?"

"He's on a business trip. Since this is summer vacation they could've taken Takako with them, but instead just the two of them went and stuck her with my parents."

Supplementing Takako's words, Yuichi stood next to her and sighed in an annoyed fashion.

"Then, the reason you were off work...was because you were babysitting at their place? That's also why you didn't answer the phone in your apartment?"

"Yeah. And my cell, too. I forgot the charger and left it there. I finally went back to get it yesterday... Anyway, Takako's been freaked out missing her mother. My parents are old and no match for kid power, so energetic me got stuck looking after her."

While talking Yuichi pulled on Wataru's shirt,

and sat down on a nearby bench. They had come to this park many times, and it was filled with various memories of them together, but this was the first time the two of them had sat together on a bench and talked.

"Oh...so you were babysitting..."

Wataru murmured seriously. For such a trivial reason, he simply couldn't contact him. When he thought of it that way, he got the feeling that times like this when they were together were the result of some good fortune.

"You feel better? Takako was a lot of trouble, so I couldn't even answer my cell much. It occurred to me...this has to be a conspiracy of my brother's."

"Conspiracy...?"

"I mean, isn't it? Pushing Takako off to study while you're studying for exams? The timing's a little too convenient. I'm sure he instructed Takako as well as you want to get the man from the park, don't let him see Yuichi, or something."

"...Are you serious?"

"Of course."

"But hey, that plan's too simple for Shohei. Let's get him more into doing flashy stuff?"

"Wow...that's pretty sharp, Wataru."

At Yuichi's laughing voice, Takako who had been spacing out on the swing looked this way. She was holding tight to the chains with her little hands and smiled impishly in Wataru's direction.

"Mister, do another kiss!"

"Huh?"

Stuck on the word "another," Wataru

up speaking stupidly. There certainly was a time when Yuichi kissed him without hesitation in front of her, but right now, from any angle, they should have looked like just two wholesome friends.

"Uh, Takako? What're you..."

"That tall guy! Takako and Uncle Yuichi saw it."

"Uh..."

At the most unexpected words, Wataru felt his whole body quickly go limp. Seeing his speechlessness, Takako said ever more proudly:

"And then, Uncle Yuichi said he'd never let anyone else have you..."

"...I definitely did say that, Takako."

Yuichi got up nimbly from the bench and folded his arms proudly in front of the swing. Hearing that severe voice must have naturally made her think she was in trouble, as Takako hurriedly stopped talking.

"Good grief, Takako... I really didn't want to believe the conspiracy theory about my brother."

Complaining in an all-at-once exhausted voice, Yuichi came back this way with a grim face. However, now that Wataru had heard the shocking words, he couldn't bring himself to look at Yuichi by any means.

"Wataru."

"....."

"Hey, Wataru. Look me in the eye."

"...I can't."

The answering voice was trembling. He never even dreamed that he was being watched by Yuichi. Then, what did he think of how indifferently Wataru had been talking before?

"I can't, Kazuki... I can't look at your face. I don't want to be seen by you."

"Why not? Aren't you always ignoring other than me? Then stop looking like you're going and look up."

"But...I....."

"Didn't I tell you? You have to make me be you. No matter what the truth is, if your feeling directed at me, then sit up straight and look at me."

"Kazuki... "

He had meant to be prepared, but now that he was here his body wouldn't obey him. Still, if Yuichi wanted him to raise his head, he had to respond. Wataru somehow exerted the effort to raise his head, and once squeezing his eyes closed, mustered his courage and opened his eyes.

"Eh... "

A flat voice unthinkingly escaped his lips.

There was a smiling face before his eyes. It took several seconds to confirm it was Yuichi.

"Ka...zuki...?"

"Don't make that face, Wataru."

"B...But..."

Not knowing what was going on, Wataru's face grew furiously confused. Takako had clearly said they saw the kiss with Masanobu. In that case, why was Yuichi smiling?

"I thought I told you not to make that face."

Yuichi thumped the dumbfounded Wataru on the head, and started speaking in a quiet tone.

"Your mock exam was today, wasn't it?"

then I was caught up with the sudden babysitting request, so I couldn't support you in any way. When Takako said we could see you, I was in a better mood, and the two of us went to near the test site."

Thinking they would surprise him, not giving any warning turned out to be a bad call, Yuichi smiled ruefully.

"Before we could call out to you, Asaka showed up. Since he helped out a lot this time around, I thought I'd let him have his credit. Once you were done talking, you'd probably come to my place anyway. So, I let him have his turn."

"Oh...you don't say..."

"But, you two didn't seem to be done with just talking and looked like you were going somewhere. If I lost sight of you there'd be no point in having come to see you, so with no other choice we followed you. It was a lot of trouble keeping Takako quiet when she was so excited."

In order to let Takako know he wasn't mad anymore, Yuichi stopped talking there and turned to face the swing. Faced with a smile, she once again was in a good mood, and energetically pumped both her legs in the air. Watching her with a smile, Yuichi sighed a little.

"But, I was naive to keep her quiet."

Sitting back down next to Wataru, he stayed quiet for a while. Wataru didn't know what to say next, so sure enough all he could do was stay silent.

"I thought I might kill him."

Yuichi eventually muttered in a low voice.

Wataru was startled and looked at him, maybe his eyes were chasing after what he had seen they were filled with a quiet anger.

"Kazuki..."

"It was the first time I'd ever felt that towards someone else. The moment I saw him draw in and kiss you, I seriously thought that."

"...Sorry."

With no other way to say it, Wataru apologized faintly. He knew that wasn't what Yuichi wanted to hear but there was no way he could not say it.

"But, why'd you go home at that point? You could have walked right on in and started shouting at me, were you...too shocked or something...?"

"Wrong. Takako was there, and there was no way I could risk coming to blows in front of her. Besides...if I had stepped in there, Asaka would've had no ground to stand on."

"Wha?"

"...I understand. Because I was the same way."

His eyes suddenly dropped to the ring on his finger, and Yuichi sadly gazed at the silver sparkle.

Wataru could tell from his expression that Yuichi was thinking back on himself from when they first met.

"I'm sure...he doesn't want to resign himself to this either. He never wants to believe that there's something he can't have."

"Asaka...resigned?"

"Yeah. I think you know, too, about his ex-girlfriend."

He wanted to ask how Yuichi knew, but Wataru

just kept quiet and nodded. Then, he knew long ago why he couldn't offer an excuse for the rumor.

At the same time as he felt a slight sense of relief, Wataru felt an inexcusable emotion towards Masanobu.

"When he called me out about the rumor, he told me himself because you might not have. About what happened with her...and the reference book. I thought I was going to snap again when I heard you cried in front of someone else besides me...but well, things being as they were, that couldn't be helped."

"....."

"That's when I knew. Why I thought Asaka was similar to me. Why I disliked that so much. He too...is resigned to something. Asaka is an adult who can do anything, and he probably also has the leeway to enjoy his own power. But, there's just one thing he really wanted that he couldn't have. The reason is...he's Masanobu Asaka."

Yuichi slowly lifted his eyes from the ring, and looked back this way. Wataru silently cast his eyes downward, and remembered what Masanobu had said when he opened up to him.

The way Masanobu was was nothing but a burden. Maybe the wound that knowing that gave him was deeper than Wataru imagined.

"I understand that feeling well. When I fell in love with you, from the start I thought I would never have you. So, intent on not wanting to be able to understand my feelings, I treated you coldly. I was also resigned."

"No way... "

"Lots of luck and coincidences piled up, and a miracle I was with you. But, even now I remember the pain of struggling to resign myself. Asaka...is that time. And, the good luck and coincidences happened to him."

"....."

Wataru and Yuichi both knew. They knew the right partner for Masanobu simply had not appeared before him yet. If only someone mutually attracted came forth, fate and God would surely give him plenty of chances.

Yuichi sighed, and said:

"So...inside my guts are boiling over, I've pissed...but..."

"Kazuki..."

"I forgive Asaka."

Under the brilliantly burning sky, he turned again to present his profile and declared that in a firm tone. That voice made its way into Wataru's heart and resounded fairly.

"But..."

Suddenly his tone of voice changed, and with a stern expression Yuichi opened his mouth again.

"Don't you forgive him."

"Wha?"

"I told you before. This and that are different things. Don't you ever forgive Asaka."

"But..."

Wataru resisted frailty.

It was a shock being kissed, but when he thought

what was in Masanobu's heart, there was no way he could hate him. If he were someone Wataru could hate in the first place, he would not have worried this much.

But when he thought about Yuichi's mentality, of course he would tell him not to forgive him. When Wataru faltered, Yuichi paid it no mind and went on.

"When I managed to get you I changed, but there's no way I can let him take advantage of it. No matter how good a guy he is, how can I let you be a replacement for his dead girlfriend?"

"So...I was her replacement..."

"Come on, Wataru. For what other reason could he've kissed you? If not as a replacement, then he really wanted you. It's simple."

"W-Wanted me...?!"

With an amazed face Yuichi kept hammering the matter over and over, and Wataru's face turned very red.

"It was because your kissing your ring stirred me up. Well, it was because you did that that I was really able to get by without hitting him."

"You were watching...?"

"Didn't I say I was? So what?"

Yuichi had become quite serious, and looked back unkindly at the bitter looking Wataru. But, maybe he had been too mean, as his eyes softened just a bit and he slowly brought his face closer.

"When I heard Asaka's story, I respected you. You really didn't make any excuses, did you?"

"...Was that sarcasm?"

"Man, you're dumb. I fell in love with you again."

After nimbly kissing him once Takako looking, Yuichi stared at Wataru's face from close with his familiar, lovely eyes.

"I love you, Wataru."

"Me too... I love you so much, Kazuki..."

After his response, once more his lips stolen. It was just a touch of a kiss, but the temperature of Wataru's skin sweetly rose.

Smiling just a little awkwardly, Yuichi stepped moved himself apart. Then, after checking that Takako was still playing on the swing, he started talking in an oddly serious tone.

"...So? What're you going to do from here?"

"What do you mean?"

"About Asaka. Naturally I can't let you do anything that would leave him alone with anyone anymore."

"Does that...mean 'Don't see him anymore'?"

Wataru also became serious and looked back in the eye. What Yuichi said made sense. Wataru had no intention of allowing a second kiss.

However...

"What're you trying to say with those eyes?"

"Huh...? Kazuki, I love you. So if you don't want it, I won't see Asaka anymore. I promise."

"....."

"Say something."

"In other words, you're saying you think it's okay to see Asaka as long as I don't dislike it."

Being mercilessly hit in the bull's-eye, Wataru was at a loss for words just for a moment. But,

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was the truth. Of course, if he did see Masanobu wouldn't defenselessly give him an opening, and might be reluctant about the relationship. But, Wataru started thinking that if he could sublimate his feelings with Masanobu into a different form, it might become something more significant for both of them.

"...If Asaka really has resigned himself to something, then I want to tell him it doesn't have to be that way. I mean, other than Shohei he's probably the only person who gets to you. I think that alone makes him an amazing person."

"Wataru...give me a break..."

Yuichi's astonished face had "You're too much" written all over it. But, after he pondered it a while, he suddenly slumped back.

"Saying that just makes it obvious that it's going to cause problems. Are you okay with that?"

"That's why I've been trying to tell you. I don't like it, I won't see him. The most important thing to me is you. I want to do as few things that you have to put up with as possible."

"...Then, I have to say the same thing back to you. Dammit, I've got no choice."

"Huh...?"

"It's cool, do what you want. I'll leave the decision to your best judgment. I guess you probably learned from what happened today anyway."

"Y...You're...sure...?"

Hearing the previous statements retracted, Wataru felt somewhat disappointed and asked in return. Yuichi showed a peevish face

answered shortly with "Sure."

"I want to say as few things as possible that you'd have to put up with. However, if he steps over the line again, I won't keep quiet about it. All right?"

"Kazuki..."

"That...and one other thing."

Suddenly changing the mood, Yuichi shifted to a new subject in a serious manner.

"I plan to talk to you in more detail once your situation settles down... Actually, my outlook on the future has become a little more visible."

"Outlook on the future..."

"Yeah. It's still just groping around in the dark, though."

"Does it have something to do with architecture?"

"More or less. As far as the ones I don't want to resign to go, I'll be active in that field. I didn't want to talk about it until I had confidence and conviction in my own feelings. But, I thought about it while you were studying. You were frantically trying to do your best, so I'd better make a good show of it too, y'know?"

"So that was why..."

Who Yuichi said he didn't want to resign to probably also meant Asaka, but most likely was his brother Shohei. Surely he couldn't enter into the same field against him with only half-hearted feelings.

"Thanks for telling me, Kazuki."

Wataru quietly grasped Yuichi's left hand and smiled a reserved smile of thanks.

"I'll...confess something, too. When you were

cold to me, I was really terribly, terribly sad. The and abusive things you said also painfully through me one by one. ...Because I loved you."

"....."

"I wished all the people you were nice to just go away. Maybe because those feelings were over, I showed more dependence on kind Asaka should have. I realize it was miserable."

"Sorry..."

Wataru was surprised and looked up at the of Yuichi's rather uncharacteristically dumbfounded voice.

"Eh, 'sorry'...Kazuki...?"

"...Sorry, Wataru."

"No...that is...it's not..."

Being apologized to so seriously made the all the more difficult. Wataru had not spoken with intention of blaming him; he had wanted to talk his own foolishness in seeking a vestige of Yu Masanobu.

He wanted to say that he was happy to be much in love with someone.

"It's all right already. In the end you told me mine, Kazuki. Right?"

Wataru spoke with a smile at a calm Yuichi.

The rings that touched each of their palms as they held hands were like keys to their moving fingers together. He thought that they weren't kindly envied arms like Masanobu's, but forceful, willful fingers.

But, to Wataru, the lover who would jealously

say a line like "I'll kill him" was a treasure more valuable than anything.

"Push me, Mister!"

Wanting to go higher, Takako raised her voice and badgered them both.

"...Kazuki. We have a request."

"Looks that way...let's go."

The two of them got up at the same time, facing each other, and started running for the little princess.

Around the time Wataru's summer vacation came to an end, Yuichi was released from babysitting and went back to work.

Do college students get two months off, thought Wataru with a very dissatisfied face. But, because his mock exam results were an A grade that far exceeded his expectations, he seemed to have a thirst for studying now. From here-on, even on weekends, it would probably be a rare thing for him to be able to stay overnight, but Yuichi exaggerated that they'd just save up the fun for next time, while smiling proudly.

The days were growing shorter bit by bit.

Just before autumn arrived, Yuichi summoned Masanobu to the "summer refuge."

"Did you hear from Shohei? Our work site will soon shift to here. The cheap candy shop seems to be 80% finished."

"What will you turn this place into?"

"A second-hand bookstore, specializing in photograph collections. It sounds like a niche store, so the owner must be quite an oddball, or rich."

"...Sounds interesting."

Folding his arms and looking up at the ceiling, Yuichi narrowed his eyes like he was drawing in his plans. Unconsciously seeing Shohei in that place, Masanobu somehow felt timid as he asked:

"So...you wanted to talk about something?"

"Actually, it's a little personal."

"....."

"I had my work shift changed. I thought I should come from here I'd cut back on my hours a little."

"Eh?"

Because he was certain that the topic was too serious, Wataru, for an instant Masanobu looked like he didn't understand. But, Yuichi leisurely brought his eyes down from above, said "That being said, I'm in, and flashed a refreshing smile.

"You're in...?"

"Your circle. It's a little late, but I'll see you work hard. I want to be part of it, too."

"Kazuki..."

It was such an unexpected proposal, Masanobu couldn't answer right away. Truth is stranger than fiction, thought Yuichi with a shrug, then the look in his eyes grew serious and he quietly asked:

"Is it too late to stop you?"

"Eh..."

"Wataru. I told him never to forgive you for what you did to him here. But, I know him. I'll tell him Wataru will forgive you. In that case, I have no choice but to say this. How about it? Is it too late?"

"....."

Taking a step forward, Yuichi gazed intently at Masanobu. Their heights were almost the same, but his thin lines made Masanobu look a little taller.

After the silence continued for about a minute, Masanobu sighed loudly. Just from that sound, Yuichi had a feeling he understood even without hearing an answer.

"Yeah...looks like it was too late."

Masanobu smiled in rueful resignation. Then, as if his interest was caught by the previous discussion, he asked Yuichi a question.

"It's strange. Why do you think Wataru would forgive me? Wouldn't that be a bad thing for you two?"

"...It can't be helped. I can't stop Wataru from thinking he wants to see you. Nor do I want to."

"He wants...to see me...?"

That fact seemed to surprise Masanobu considerably, and a short while he was speechless. But, that there was no lie in Yuichi's words seemed to get through right away.

"Honestly, I thought he might hate me."

Masanobu looked honestly happy, and it made Yuichi chew on his disgust all the more. But unfortunately, he didn't feel like just backing down here, so he said, "You can't be happy about it forever, can you?"

"If after being kissed he still wants to see me, it's proof that I don't bother him."

"Wrong. It's proof that he likes you."

After that grinning retort, he fell silent in surprise. In reality, Wataru held more favor towards Masanobu than he himself thought. Even if they weren't

feelings of love, it was quite a stark reality for Yu Man...what's so great about a crafty guy like this, anyway...?

In all honesty, it wasn't like Yuichi didn't think "This has become a problem." But, because a guy like Masanobu had gotten serious, it must have meant that Wataru had that much charm. Discovering that was a great pleasure for Yuichi.

Masanobu showed a somewhat comical expression to Yuichi, who had regained his composure. He took a short breath, and said in an earnest tone

"...I thought you would be able to stop this. That's why I sent so many signals."

"Huh?"

"Remember the time when I told you about Wataru inviting Wataru to the concert, and the time when I called you out early in the morning to give an excuse for the rumor? I was sending you signals over and over

"....."

"Saying 'stop me'."

But, it had been useless. Masanobu smiled at a face that indeed said that much.

"Sorry, but I can't believe that."

"Eh...?"

"You should know my personality well. If you really wanted to be stopped, you should have found a better way to go about it. For starters, don't tell me about it now."

Yuichi quickly denied Masanobu's sentimental comment.

"I'm different from you. Subversively trying to

keep away those close who approach Wataru, scheming. Who'd do such petty things?"

"But, you should have thought it was bad for me to get serious. Am I right?"

"....."

It stung, but that was the truth, so Yuichi unthinkingly swallowed his words.

Regarding the kiss from before, there was still Masanobu's restraint. That was why Wataru was able to escape, and it didn't come off as too serious. Otherwise, naturally he would have been on-guard and would probably not have said "I want to see him."

Wataru still didn't realize it.

Masanobu Asaka was a dangerous man.

"Kazuki."

Masanobu smiled a satisfied-looking smile and said to a perplexed Yuichi:

"I've seen many instances up to now where it looked like Wataru was going to cry."

"Wha..."

"Because for whatever reason, it's only when I'm watching that he gets caught up in trouble. So, at first I purely thought I couldn't let him be. I never thought I myself would fall in love with a boy."

"But..." Masanobu continued.

"...even those many times he looked like he was going to break down, Wataru never once let his tears fall. A boy like that showed me his sadness for the first time. What's more, it wasn't for anyone else...but for me."

"....."

"Heart-melting, isn't it?"

Of course even Yuichi lost the will to o such compelling persuasive power. Just as he had in love with Wataru's smiling face, Masanobu ha his heart to his crying face.

He couldn't help but think that this was his opponent. To-boot, from today-on it was no longer case of "likes opposing." There was not a single s thing between the two of them.

But...

"That could be, too."

Yuichi trembled for a moment. The unyie joy from the depths of his heart began to surface on his face.

Yuichi raised both corners of his mouth formed an enchantingly fair smile.

"Well, fair enough. We'll get past stuff th any number of times. From here on is where I'll back the debt for all the good luck and coincidence got me Wataru."

"Kazuki...?"

Masanobu spoke suspiciously at unaccustomed expression. Yuichi didn't care, and his smile at him.

"Wataru said something: you're like the old But, from here-on, even you can't be anything but right? That's what getting serious is all about."

"....."

"But, unfortunately, I have the patent unkindness and abusive language. In the end, no m how different a face you try to show Wataru it's the s He'll probably see a shadow of me in you again."

Yuichi's words were not a bluff, but certainly exceedingly close to the truth. Masanobu was confident in that, and he decided that answering directly here and now was not an advisable plan.

"...If you're going to be part of the club, that of course means that Wataru will come by to hang out."

"Eh?"

"So, I'll add that as a condition for you joining. Once his exams are over, bring Wataru with you whenever possible."

"...You serious?"

He knit his brows unpleasantly, but in any case Masanobu seemed to be serious. Yuichi didn't know how many more conditions would be added on if he kept talking with him. He decided to go home right away, only answering, "I'll think about it."

You know what...

The moment he turned his back, he suddenly realized that he hadn't once used polite speech.

Right... After all, I did think about killing him at one point.

Realizing this, he almost laughed carelessly right there. But instead of laughing out-loud, Yuichi slowly raised the finger on his left hand wearing the ring above his head.

Guess there's still a long way to go before the happy ending...

They would surmount all the waves to come.

Yuichi softly brought the ring to his lips, and made a little wish in his heart. Strangely, that was exactly what Wataru had done, and Masanobu who was

watching felt like his heart had been struck.

"...What gives?"

An impolite stare injuring his mood, turned back around brusquely. After Masanobu hesitated a moment, he smiled like he had pulled himself together.

"I have a message for Wataru. If you would like you to deliver it."

"Message?"

"Yeah. About the reference books you found. It's just the insides, you can come get them anytime."

"Just...the insides..."

Not knowing that this was Wataru's "favorite item," Yuichi made a somewhat baffled face. He had heard that Masanobu's girlfriend had left a message and a reference book, but he was not aware that they had had an exchange regarding it.

But, pressing the question here would probably be uncouth. If he wanted to know, he could ask directly.

"...All right. I'll be sure to tell him."

Yuichi returned an emboldened smile.

That face was one Masanobu had never seen before, and it almost made him seem like a man he had never met.

After he was left alone, Masanobu looked around the room. The "summer refuge" would soon cease to be, and would be reborn as a book.

The place where he kissed Wataru would probably also take on a totally different air. If

want it to become a memory this way, all he could do was get more serious from here.

"Still, though...talk about tough."

Smiling a bitter smile, he spoke to himself. On the way back from the concert, Wataru had tried with all his might to console the silent Masanobu. While Masanobu felt that moment was cute enough, "When I look at you, Asaka, somehow I can't leave you be" was what really did him in, he thought.

When he thought about it, maybe the way he looked at Wataru changed completely starting then.

"He'll probably see a shadow of me in you again."

Strong words, smiled Masanobu ruefully. If he could say a line like that without hesitation, he must have been plenty confident in himself, or else he was a show-off to a foolish extent.

Perhaps whatever scheme he hammered out, Wataru's focus on Yuichi would never change. It might be quite hard to fight on with that knowledge.

"I'm not about to give up."

When he put it in words, his heart immediately uplifted. As he hadn't felt that way in a long time, the thought alone made him think that falling in love had had merit.

There had to be a way to not cause pain or trouble for Wataru, and yet be certain to acquire him. He didn't know if such a plan really existed or not, but just thinking about it put him in a superb mood. If his opponent was Yuichi, it meant that he could move without holding back at all.

"Thank you..."

Masanobu murmured softly to his girlfriend, and thought of the reference books he intentionally forgot. There was no mistake the message she left him would go on inspiring him. In any case, there was no need whatsoever to abandon their love.

What excuse should he use to call on her next? When Yuichi heard it, what kind of grin would he display? Just imagining such things brought Masanobu considerable pleasure.

The spot of the "summer refuge" would soon vanish.

But, he would see to it that the second kiss would not vanish. Masanobu suddenly fortified his resolve and said with a smile as if Yuichi and Wataru were before him:

"After all, isn't this where the real deal starts?"

Your Confession in Both Hands

He figured he'd wait just another ten minutes.

Staring at his watch while sighing, Wataru Fujii muttered to himself. Suddenly, he was assaulted by an abrupt anxiety that the morning horoscope he happened to see before school that said "Fortune in love: worst possible" might possibly have meant exactly this. He had absolutely no interest in fortune telling, but being made to wait in vain so many times for the same person naturally made him suspect that it might be the effect of some unseen power.

"Ahh, it's no use. I won't retain any of it like this!"

Wataru closed the reference book resting on his lap with a thud, and sighed once again.

The middle of September was nearing, and as if chasing the sun, evening was steadily coming earlier. Even in school, the students wearing summer clothes were becoming sparse, and Wataru himself wasn't yet wearing a blazer but had exchanged his regulation shirt for a long-sleeve one. The watch peeking out from his white cuff indicated 5:00 on its digital display. It was still in-time for their indoor rendezvous at the fast-food spot the other party had chosen, but even twenty minutes

after the arranged time that party had not shown

"That idiot Kazuki, what's he doing...?"

Leaning back against his chair with his arms folded, he looked outside with a sullen gaze. The view through the window was dyed an indigo blue. A blurry white new moon floated high above.

Because he did not have prep school today, he normally be at the library with his best friend Kawamura. But as they both walked out of the school gate, which had been timed, an email arrived on Wataru's cell phone. The sender was Yuichi Kazuki. As he was the same person as the Kazuki they couldn't say it openly, but Yuichi was his older brother's senior boyfriend, and he had been seeing him for about a year.

"So, Kazuki's asking to see you? As a result, you two are a pair of fools barreling down the street."

"Kawamura...you know, someday I'll kill you."

"Come on, it's the truth. Well, I don't mind dying, but why not go?"

"Uh...but..."

"Don't hold back. Come on, hurry and see him. I'm sure he's waiting for you."

Taking the jeering from his good friend, Wataru hid his embarrassment by quickly saying "Thanks." He was happy that Kawamura had watched the hardships that led to mutual love. Yuichi, treated them both as very ordinary lovers. He had to listen to jokes like "pair of fools" or "Love is a thorny path," but along with Wataru's sister, Kawamura was a valuable person to have in-the-kitchen.

"...Geez. If that Kazuki shows up, I'm h

him treat me until it kills him!"

The sundry store interior at twilight made him feel extra isolated as the person he waited on failed to arrive. Lacking the willpower to force a smile, Wataru cursed softly in his mouth. With "equality amongst things near" as a motto, he had finally been establishing them going Dutch, yet the rate at which Wataru was treated to food had once again been climbing recently.

That was all because Yuichi had been late to their meetings many times. Because this continued he often paid the bill, but free meals for a reason like that really didn't please Wataru at all.

"I never liked being spoiled in the first place. But he's always..."

"Huh. And just now, you were raving about how much you'd get me to treat you."

"Buzz off. That was simply a figure of speech...uh...!"

"All right? At a glance, the remains of these wrappers must be a Big Burger and a Teriyaki Chicken. Then, a large fry, medium Oolong Tea, apple pie and a corn salad...and...hey, Wataru? How much do you have to eat to be full?"

"Kazuki...when did you...?"

"Aren't you high-and-mighty with your arms crossed like that! Eh, Wataru Fujii?"

Before Wataru's unpleasant upward glance, Yuichi stood there smiling like he was looking down on him. He didn't seem at all concerned with how late he was, and Wataru sulked. Which of us is high-and-mighty?

Somehow or other, Yuichi seemed to have extracted himself from the circle's work site. He was by no means a name-brand snob, but he always had a balance of clothes from select shops he liked and nameless but well-made things. But, the image of him standing there with a T-shirt overtop jeans was a rough look that wholly suggested it was laundry day. Nevertheless, there was an air of a line being drawn between him and other people, and it seemed to him to be a natural part of his disposition.

"So, did you simply take a break again to get here?"

Wataru slowly uncrossed his arms and sighed. He started talking.

"Ever since you joined Asaka's club, you seem to get busier and busier. If you have to get back to the work site, we can't make this last very long, can we? Why not urge me to hurry up?"

"What gives? Weren't you mad, Wataru?"

"It's because your bad attitude didn't just change at this instant. If I took every single thing seriously, it would only end in a fight. Since we're together now, it would just suck."

"....."

"Am I right?"

When he asked again and grinned, as he expected, Yuichi looked terribly ashamed. His expression, which had been impudent until a moment ago, changed to a shameful color in the blink of an eye, and he closed his lips.

"...Well, sorry."

"Eh...?"

"I mean sorry for making you wait. I've been late every time recently. I'm apologizing, so don't get all submissive all of a sudden. It really makes me feel ill at ease."

It was an exceedingly contrary way of speaking, but it came across that Yuichi was conflicted deep inside, and Wataru carelessly came close to bursting out in laughter. It was that contrary side that this honor student with perfect good looks and style would show only to him. At the start he had been at its mercy, but he had bit by bit gotten a handle on dating Yuichi effectively.

Yuichi ordered coffee and a cheeseburger, and casually sat down in the opposite seat. Wataru watched him cross his long legs in a cramped manner under the small table, and then he opened his mouth once more.

"Honestly speaking, aren't your lateness and the club activities really unrelated?"

"More or less. As soon as I officially joined, that Asaka went and moved forward on two projects simultaneously. You should already know about one of them. The former post office slated to become a bookstore..."

Yuichi said that much, then suddenly halted the hand he had started to drink coffee with. It was because he noticed a tremble in Wataru's eyes for a second. The fact that that was where Masanobu had kissed him by surprise, and that Yuichi of all people saw it, was still a small thorn that tortured Wataru.

"...What's wrong, Wataru?"

"'What's wrong'...?"

Maybe Yuichi was speaking insensitively for purpose. If he was, it was quite ill-natured. In any case, Wataru, and he said half out of frustration:

"Doesn't working there...bother you, Kazuki?"

"Why?"

"Why? I mean..."

"I'm okay with it."

"....."

"I finished my declaration to Asaka there a while ago, so I'm back."

Yuichi replied with an unconcerned face. Wataru, not understanding, asked "Declaration?" of him.

"Kazuki, did you talk to Asaka about something? When?"

"The first Saturday in September. We went to Kichijoji to eat, right? To celebrate you scoring first grade."

"R...Right..."

"That day, before I met up with you, I saw Kazuki there. A lot happened this summer...and if I was to join his circle, I thought we'd need to talk without holding anything against each other."

"Do you mean the message in the reference book...?"

"Yeah. That was when I heard it from him directly in his hand. Just to let you know."

While speaking, Yuichi who slowly lowered his arms. Lifting his chin somewhat, the way he looked down was indeed haughty, but naturally much more a show than it was sincere. Wataru

unthinkingly almost charmed by it, but he hurriedly pulled himself together and urged the conversation forward.

"And then? What the heck did you declare to Asaka?"

"That's simple. I told him he'd never get his chance."

"For-real...?"

Speechless from being so surprised, Wataru was answered with a triumphant smile. But it seemed Yuichi, who hated to lose, certainly would have said exactly that. Though then the strange thing was how when he talked with Wataru in the park, his face said he had already forgotten about the kiss incident. Wataru had known that he was concerned about him, but he never thought that he would confront Masanobu secretly about it.

"I'm kidding, moron."

"Heh?"

"You try telling that guy something like that to his face. All it'd do is stir up his feelings even more."

"Kazukiiii..."

"Whatever guile you use, Wataru's only ever going to see you through me. That's what I said, to be exact."

"....."

"Apt phrasing, eh?"

Yuichi exaggerated in a bold tone, and then suddenly his face became serious. Even more depth was added to his jet black eyes, and that meaningful gaze was directed straight at Wataru.

"Ka...zuki...?"

"Asaka, he hasn't said anything, has he?"

"...Nope. Nothing's really changed from I've gotten several emails since then, but it's been all harmless subjects. You've come up as a top times."

When he was asked, his voice came honestly. Like he had told Yuichi before, Wataru bothered to avoid Masanobu; he just kept a neutral distance from him. Masanobu hadn't especially said he wanted to see him, and Wataru had exam studying to do. He had no intention of seeing him either. So, their communication consisted of short emails once or twice a week. Wataru was aware of this, but since he had said "Do you want?" he must have had to give his tacit answer. Given that Wataru did not dislike Masanobu, it was doubtless that it would be useless for Yuichi to oppose.

"The fact that he's not saying it means that's not effective."

With a whiff the tension in Yuichi's shoulders eased and he once again smiled an evidently genuine smile.

"Okay. Hearing that puts my heart a little at-ease. After this he plans on coming by the weekend but now I feel like I can at least shake his hand. Today my brother was coming with him. Damn, all the villains at once."

"Wasn't Shohei doing the plans for the new office?"

"Yeah. Our Renovation Club's getting

down from him. He hasn't done detailed
ts yet, but we're moving ahead with dismantling
n his general input. At the same time I have to
y for the school festival in October, so I'm being
into the ground every day. And it's not like I
ch on lectures or reports either, so it wouldn't be
even if I had multiple clones of myself."

"Things have really been that rough..."

Hearing Yuichi's situation for the first time,
s expression abruptly clouded over. If this was
on for being late three times in a row, why hadn't
him sooner than this?

"Then...then, you didn't have to force yourself to
re..."

"Wataru...?"

I mean, isn't that true? If you explained the
tuation, I could get by even without seeing you
ile. I was ready from the start to not get to spend
ne with you until my exams were over."

"Hey, wait a minute."

"Even late, if you come see me I don't think
me I wait as useless. But, if you're using time
t have...I know you said before that you don't
ut that really is bad."

While he was talking, Wataru got so serious it
d even him. It might be okay right now, but he
ant them stretched so thin that their desire to see
er became a social obligation. Just from thinking
heart felt as heavy as if he had swallowed lead.
Yuichi had been quietly watching during this.
continued between them for a time, and Wataru

became more and more dejected. About the time he became a little faint-hearted and wondered what he should do...the lips before his eyes unexpectedly gently became a smile. Yuichi's grin brilliantly lit up the atmosphere, and Wataru unconsciously widened his eyes.

His expression was as-always proud, and his arms folded his proud attitude remained the same. Despite that, his eyes, sweetly tinged with honey, were filled with a charm that was undeniable. The atmosphere of them being by themselves was one thing, but the atmosphere inside a crowded store was foul play. Wataru sensed his pulse, and timidly opened his mouth.

"What gives...?"

"Well...I think it's an amazing contradiction. I do say so myself."

"Contradiction...?"

"...I'm amazed at myself. While I said you should call me anytime since I'd come see you...I'm actually doing the opposite. Sorry, Wataru."

"Kazuki..."

After being apologized to that nicely, he didn't know how to respond. Even though he had received a complaint that sounded like a false accusation, he said "sorry" in his best voice.

"I confess. When I'm busy, that's when I won't see you the most."

"Eh..."

Yuichi continued as if he wasn't mindful of the fact just how passionate a thing he had said.

"It's true. Email text and just hearing your

isn't enough of you at all. I want to feel you near more, and I want to watch you smiling. So, I managed my time and called on you over and over. But, it's obviously not very funny for this to be my third time showing up late. It's true that I wasted the valuable time of an exam student, and I decided once I got here today that I'd explain properly."

"....."

"I probably should have said this up front at the start, but I thought for sure that if you knew I was busy you wouldn't come when I called. You're worried about me like what you said before, aren't you? In the end, regardless of what I say you haven't been the one to call on me one time."

Even if it's just for five minutes I don't care. Desire to see me countless times.

The words Yuichi had said to him in Okinawa suddenly revived in Wataru's heart.

I get it. Kazuki's...

Yuichi had always been better-than-average at dealing with most things, and until now he had never had the experience of losing himself in devotion to anything. That even kind of lifestyle had colored his relationship with Wataru, and now was making for days of trial and error towards his goals for the future. He was in the midst of piling up perplexity, excitement and joy at this side of himself he did not know. He probably sent email saying "I miss you" every time he made some new discovery. An un-Yuichi-like tendency to act without thinking things through had given rise to the vice of lateness, but even so, Wataru couldn't help but be moved

knowing the truth like this.

"Oh, so that's it..."

"Besides...I thought it's not so bad."

Just as Wataru felt his shoulders relax in relief, a chatty tone mixed into Yuichi's voice.

"Not bad?"

"Yeah. At first, my goal was definitely a smiling face."

"...But?"

"Your expression when you're waiting for me is pretty sexy. I saw it once and it became a habit."

"K-Kazukiii, give me a break!"

Half of it was joking, but the remaining half was serious. Wataru turned red and scowled, and his happy sounding laughing voice spilled from his smirking lips.

"Ah. That doesn't mean I came here for a purpose."

"Well, now I don't know about that..."

Maybe he wasn't sorry after all.

While he was aware that it only made him feel happy, Wataru was unable to hide his bitter expression.

"Huh. Well, the Renovation Club sure hasn't been as awfully active as of late."

In the classroom at lunch break, Kawamura finished with his food and quietly nodded along to the woman Mitsuki Naruse who he was enthusiastically pursuing was also a member of the "Renovation Research Society," so he must have had a lot of things on his mind. He had started actively helping out

the circle so he could see her, and now it seemed they thought highly enough of him to call him "Alternate."

"You know, they all hold back because Kazuki's there, but I hear "What happened to Junior?" a lot. Why don't you drop by every once in awhile?"

"You said because Kazuki's there?"

"Yeah. And it's laughable. Kazuki, if anyone carelessly drops your name in front of him, he needles away at them. And with a grin on that pretty face of his...y'know?"

"Really...?"

Precisely because he could easily imagine that scene, Wataru could think of nothing with which to answer. First off, wouldn't everyone think it strange, an overt attitude like that?

"What's Kazuki thinking? Maybe he's okay with other people finding out about us?"

"Who knows? It's not like he's not really concerned. Hey, you know that weird rumor a while ago about you and Asaka? Seems like it bugged him a whole lot."

While playing around with the coffee pack he had drained, Kawamura said as if in admiration:

"But that's good, being important to him. Besides, since Kazuki officially became a member, the feel about him's changed a little. Before, he was as elusive as he was good-looking."

"Changed...?"

"Yeah. Now it's become easy to tell what he's thinking...I guess. He was popular with the circle before, but now you could say that his emotions are clearer now,

and there's a feeling of familiarity."

"Uh-huh. He really seems to be having fun."

"But hey, it's not just the Renovation Club we're gonna get a lot busier soon, too."

As Wataru pondered, Kawamura pulled him back to reality with his enthusiastic chatter.

"You know, next month's Ryokuyo Festival is on the executive committee, and I'd like you to help out with things, Wataru."

"Ryokuyo Festival... That reminds me, Kazuki was also saying something about a school festival. I think it's that time of the year already."

"Right, right! Tomorrow in homeroom we're going to have a discussion about our class's progress. If you've got any good ideas, speak up. I don't suppose you can do anything very elaborate as seniors, but there is to have fun anyway."

"Kawamura, you're really into this..."

"Hey, this way I have an excuse to ignore Mitsuki. Until now she keeps turning down my invitations by saying it'd distract me from concentrating on exams."

So, that's why! Wataru smiled ruefully, suddenly thinking about Yuichi.

I wonder if Kazuki would come to Ryokuyo Festival if I asked...

He didn't speak, but just murmured it quietly within his heart. In the time since Yuichi had graduated, it was sad to think that they would never again catch each other's students' eyes to meet in-passing or catch each other's eyes nonchalantly in the hallways. More than once

twice, Wataru had, in spite of where he was, vainly and unconsciously searched for Yuichi in his school uniform. It had been difficult to openly make contact with Yuichi, who was always the focus of everyone's attention, but even so Wataru fondly remembered the several months after they first shared their feelings with one another.

The locked student council office. The distant tumult of gym classes, and the slightly audible sounds of wind instruments. The times after school filled with so many kisses. Quickly hiding when they sensed someone else, holding each other in the silence. The sweet secret spurred on their feelings, and the existence of the rings made the meaning of each time different, creating memories.

"Wataru? Hellooo, Wataru?"

"Eh...ah!"

"What're you grinning about over there? First bell's ringing."

"Hrrrn...yeah, yeah! I know!"

Wataru became irked and pushed aside the right hand waving in front of his eyes. Because he had been carelessly immersed, the beating of his heart had sped up recklessly. Even without Kawamura making fun of him, this always happened when he thought of Yuichi. Though he told himself to get used to him already, he had a feeling it had actually gotten worse.

We're not in the same school anymore, and it's not like I can see him every day.

Yuichi had said, "Let's live together come spring." Even if their circumstances differed, so long as they came home to the same place, maybe a new

world would open up? There would probably be difficulties in making it all come together, but give them they couldn't see each other as much as they wanted. The promise emboldened Wataru quite a bit.

I want to walk through school with Kazuko for such a long time. He might stand out again, but he's already graduated, and maybe it won't be as depressing as before...

It was so gratifying that thinking about it made the Ryokuyo Fest seem like fun all of a sudden. The short break before exams, it promised to be quite an eventful day.

Not noticing that Kawamura was once again waving his right hand, Wataru's chest swelled with hope.

Ryokuyo High School's culture festival was held in the middle of October every year and held under the name "Ryokuyo Fest." Even seniors, far from the limelight, still got into it and for a brief time had their own festive mood. While being a prominent school within the city, a liberal school tradition was Ryokuyo High's special rule: as long as they fell within the bounds of common sense adornments like piercings and tattoos were allowed, and in all things student independence was regarded as essential. Even though it was an open-minded school, the uproar surrounding Wataru and Yuichi's matching rings still occurred. The Festival was an established custom as well as a chance to realize something once every year.

"Like I said, isn't that the same as a bazaar?"

Standing at the platform, Kawamura glanced back at the words "free market" written on the blackboard. Mai Tachibana, who was both on the executive committee and serving as secretary, halted the hand holding her chalk and sighed.

"Isn't this good enough? No other decent opinions are forthcoming, and all everyone has to do for a free market is gather up stuff they don't use and we're done. Even you don't think there's a need for a pointless fight with the budgetary committee, Kawamura."

"Is something that shabby good enough? This is our last culture festival. A bazaar's something where you get married, have kids, and then once those kids are in grade school they're forced to take part even if they don't want to."

"That's a strange example, but still..."

While hinting at the implication that it was stupid, Mai shrugged her slender shoulders. This quite inconclusive discussion had left an air of uncertainty hanging throughout the class.

It was already thirty minutes since the start of homeroom, and the only ideas that had come up in that time were conservative things like a cafe, a free market, and a takoyaki shop. All of them lacked freshness and at the same time sounded like ideas that any class might suggest, so there was a good chance they'd be rejected by the executive committee the next day. If two classes ended up coming up with the same idea, they would end up having to draw for it.

"I definitely get where Kawamura's coming from."

A male student folded his arms like he was

worried.

"That's why I want to know if there are special ideas...something that won't break the bank but that we can all get into that's also fresh. I got the feeling we've about run out of the usual things."

"He's right about that. Was there anything that stands out?"

"Since we're doing this anyway, we might as well do it well..."

It wasn't that no one was motivated, but the ability to come up with something seemed to be lacking. Kawamura was at least passionate, but it didn't seem like he had any original plans. It was the same story with Wataru, who had been asked to help.

Oh man...of course, I'd better offer something too...

As the students quarreled over this and that, only the other committee member Mai had a better look on her face. She probably wasn't interested in the culture festival in the first place. Kawamura had had a crush on her and was jilted, so Wataru was somehow to let him come out of this looking good.

"Just gathering up disused stuff has no value and is pretty weak."

Someone put the obvious opinion into words. Impact...thought Wataru, and just then an idea flashed through his mind.

"Ah, okay then. All we have to do is add some kind of value."

"Add value? What's that supposed to mean, Fuyuko?"

"Like, not disused things but

example...personal effects of popular students and teachers. You know, performers often have auctions for charity...well, why not have a Ryokuyo edition of that? Of course we probably won't collect all that much, but that way we can get people talking and get a lot of them to attend. Then, to an extent, we'll choose carefully from among our exhibits."

"That's not bad."

Kawamura's eyes shone at Wataru's idea. For a spoken suggestion, it was quite a unique plan. If they used the pretext of charity, even if money became involved, the school probably wouldn't be fussy about it. And if they produced it well, it might be more rousing than simply "playing store."

"Oops...Kawamura, I've got to go. You think up the rest of the details."

"Sure, leave it to me. How about it, everyone? Think we can use his idea now?"

"I like it! Sounds like fun!"

The one who supported it in the blink of an eye was, surprisingly, Mai. Although she had seemed about to fall asleep before, both her hands came together and her eyes sparkled. What her aim was wasn't clear, but with much eagerness she added "auction" to the board in notably large letters. One by one the other group members expressed their approval, and the auction was decided on almost unanimously. Just as they began discussing what kind of items they could publicize as lead-ins to stir up interest and from whom in the several days before the culture festival, the chime rang.

Wataru's class's program safely earned the

approval of the executive committee.

The morning would be devoted to preparation and publicity, and the auction would start at 1:00 in their rearranged classroom. The next concern was the strategy of getting people to bring hot items that would have popularity associated with them, so as to attract the interest of everyone. In particular, the second day would be the climax, so a strong lineup was needed for it. Discussions on this would be held many times in class; at-present, negotiations were beginning between students and teachers with exhibits they wanted to bring out. As Kawamura took command, energetic Wataru also often took part in the consultations.

"For starters, the number-one popular guy is probably Miho. Then there's Hojo, who does modeling, and the nurse-teacher Miss Tokieda, the combo of a girl and men's ballet club president and vice-president, and the department head Mr. Matsutoya... Hnn...we could add five more. Well, after all, popular people have been added to them the moment they're selected. As long as it's not anyone overly controversial, I think they'll cooperate..."

"That was pretty good, to bring all this together in just a week. I'm impressed."

While getting ready to leave the classroom and go home, Wataru listened to Kawamura's interim report on actuality, in spite of the daily negotiations and meetings. Kawamura did not seem tired at all, but rather seemed excited.

"But hey, we really can't sit back yet. The auction is half-joke, but money will actually ch

hands. Even if these are popular people in the school, there's no one who sticks out like Kazuki did last year..."

"...That's true."

"That is, Kazuki was extra-special. I couldn't handle it if people like that were all over the place."

Before, when Mai jilted Kawamura by saying "I'm in love with Kazuki," he had bitingly said similar things as he drowned his cares in booze. Even though it had hardly been a year since then, it seemed like the distant past. While getting into a slightly nostalgic mood, Wataru held his bag at his side.

"It's all right. You're doing your best, Kawamura. Everyone's really getting into the spirit, and there're almost three weeks until Ryokuyo Fest. If you can keep the energy at this level, I'm sure it'll be a success."

"Oh, yeah? For-real though, I'm thankful for you. You came up with a good plan, and you helped me negotiate with Miho. She was saying that this makes you and her even. What's that about?"

"Uh...huh, I don't know either..."

"Hmmm. Oh well. When I saw you spacing out thinking about Kazuki, I thought 'This is hopeless' and half-gave up. But thank goodness."

Wataru responded to Kawamura's joking with a wry smile that said So you did notice. In any case, it made him very happy to have been even a little helpful to his best friend.

"Oh, crap. Kawamura, let's hurry."

He suddenly noticed that time for prep school was drawing near. Wataru hurriedly thumped

Kawamura on the shoulder, and they started v quickly out of the classroom. Suddenly behind t sugary voice called out, "Hey!" I feel like I've se pattern before... thought Wataru with a bad preni as he turned around, and sure enough there stood

"I really need to talk to you."

Suggestively moving the plump lips so p with guys, she looked at Wataru with upturned From that act could be felt the wordless pressu cute, so let me." Maybe because of that, Wata never dealt well with her. In the school grade belo was the beautiful girl Miho Ookusa, and due to odd circumstances Wataru was acquainted with h he did not at all sense that kind of cunning fro That was why he thought that Mai must be an exc after all.

"...What, Tachibana? You need somethin

"Kawamura's with you too, perfect. S about Ryokuyo Fest."

"Huh?"

"I talked to the others, and sure enoug think that limiting the exhibitors to people at the is too restrictive. We have popular kids as it is, bu of them really seem special enough to stand out...

"....."

Given that they were the ones asking for pe items to be donated, Mai's remark was quite Wataru grew offended, and Kawamura unexpe said "Quit talking like that" in a stern voice.

"Tachibana, never say anything like that You'll be the embarrassment of our class."

"Kawamura..."

Moved by his friend's emboldened words, Wataru unconsciously looked at him with respect. Wataru saw Kawamura as always talking about girls and as having a somewhat trivial manner, so this unexpected side of him was a surprise. If this was the effect of new-found love, that woman Mitsuki was really something.

Mai was a little taken aback by a firm attitude from a guy she had once rejected. But, maybe she really did reconsider as she meekly apologized with a soft "I'm sorry..."

"I'll be careful from now on, so don't get so mad. Okay, Kawamura?"

"Eh...no, well...it's not a big deal. I'm not mad at all. Yeah, no worries."

Kawamuraaaa...

Kawamura was back to normal in an instant, and Wataru felt let-down all of a sudden. But, maybe this was more the real him. Wataru sighed in exasperation, and then Mai's eyes unexpectedly shifted to him.

"Kazuki."

"Heh?"

"You know, wasn't there a rumor going around before that your sister and he were going out? Back then no one clearly denied it. But in the end, no one could find positive proof and it died out."

"Um...well, yeah..."

"Aren't you acquainted with Kazuki, Fujii? I mean, sometimes you'd go home together, and he would come to your classroom looking for you. That's where the rumors about your sister came from."

"Uh, I guess I can see that..."

While earnestly soothing his heart had started to race, Wataru somehow smoothed his expression over. The fact that his and Yuichi were of the same design was made the target of rumor at that time. The roughest one among them was that Karin and Yuichi were dating. If that was how it seemed to everyone, Wataru wouldn't have to be bothered by Yuichi anymore. By being vague with whoever asked him, Wataru was able to evade discussing his feelings, but meanwhile his heart was hurting contrary to his planning.

In the end, that rumor became the trigger for them falling in love, so he didn't think about it any more now. But, naturally, hearing it come out of Mai's mouth once again was bad for his heart. What if she suspected that Karin was still Yuichi's favorite? In that case, what should Wataru answer her?

I could never say...that I'm Kazuki's favorite.

In reality, that rumor did exist among the other people. But, at least there was no one who took it seriously enough to interrogate either Wataru or Yuichi about it. After Yuichi graduated and the rumors stopped, Wataru was relieved that things around him had calmed down, but he never thought he would see the same situation come to light again.

"Are you okay, Fujii? You face kind-of strange when you're upset."

"Uh, well...we've got prep school, and I might be a bit late about to be late..."

"Sorriry. I'll make this brief, then. In

...s, I think something of Kazuki's would be the best draw of the auction. At any rate, even now he boasts of a preeminent popularity, and now that he's graduated, there're a lot of freshman girls who're really getting it."

"Ah-ha. Glorification becomes ideal when you only know the actual person."

Yeah, yeah, Kawamura interjected heedlessly, without a moment's delay Mai glared at him and "How rude!"

"It's not glorification, Kazuki really is wonderful!"

"...Sorry."

"So, could I get you to negotiate with him, ? I'd come with you if you did. The auction idea occurs in the first place, so you wouldn't mind, would "

"Me? You want me to negotiate with him?"

You're kidding, he thought as his voice unconsciously wavered.

In the first place, Yuichi would never agree to give over one of his valuables to some stranger. No, the honor student Yuichi might have said "Help yourself" with a smile, but Wataru could at the least not imagine that from him now. For that matter, Wataru didn't even know what kind of verbal lashing he might get for being asked to suggest it.

It was impossible. It was reckless. It was completely absurd.

Even if Mai resented him for it, he would flatly refuse. He had just determined this...

"Kazuki, huh...? That probably would bring a lot of people."

"K-Kawamura! You, too?!"

"Aren't I right? There're girls who're doing up for coming if we do it. Even we would do something of Kazuki's, they said. I'm sure it will attract plenty of people."

"You said it. Anyhow, Yuichi Kazuki is so popular there're rumors floating around about the school; the whole school district, actually."

"There you have it, Fujii. Won't you pitch in to help for the sake of our class? Huh?"

"Ugh..."

Stared at by Mai and locked on to by Kawa, Wataru's hope-filled gaze, Wataru was in a corner. Nearly all of Yuichi's friends had graduated with him, and none of them didn't belong to any clubs there were no underclassmen especially close to him. The important thing was that the guy who was the most famous person in school was gone. There were very few people to go through to get to him.

"I'll..."

"You'll?"

"I'll just talk... I'll just try talking to him..."

Barely managing to speak, his somber thoughts left him unable to respond further.

While being quickly hugged by Mai, Wataru's face suddenly lit up, Wataru's feelings grew darker and darker.

The responsibility of negotiating with Kazuki had fallen to Wataru, but a week went by without him being able to say anything. As if asking him wasn't

enough, the deal had see-sawed until finally the condition "In addition to a favorite item of Kazuki's, we'll have him show up himself the day of the auction" wound up being added. Naturally, Kawamura was against this, but in the end all the girls in class got their way instead.

"Damn that Tachibana... Was this the real reason she went along with this from the start?"

It was a clear autumn Sunday. In contrast to the refreshing air, Wataru's heart was as-ever in a state of melancholy. Even though he wanted to fully enjoy Ryokuyo Fest while walking down the school halls with Yuichi and the mood of when they had first gotten together, even that meager dream did not seem like it would come true. At this point it was not just a big deal in Wataru's class; in the blink of an eye, the rumor had made its way among girls all over, and last night even Karin, who went to a neighborhood girls' school, had been asked whether it was true or not.

I was aware of Kazuki's popularity, but it's still incredible six months after he graduated...?

Wataru muttered to himself, sick of these feelings, and sighed very deeply. At this point, the single statement "I was turned down" probably wouldn't be enough to resolve the situation. For that reason, he practically couldn't guess how he could get Yuichi to consent to donating an exhibit. What's more, Wataru really was disinclined to ask him to show up at the event himself.

But...still. This time, it's not just my problem...

Today, for the first time in a while, he was meeting with Yuichi early in the day. Just like the

lectures Wataru was taking at prep school, activities were of course off for Sunday. Because he worked part-time as a waiter at a cafe, he had been there on weekends and when he had nothing to do because he felt worked to death, he had had his share back further.

"Look at you, Wataru. You're right on-time."

"Eh...oh, you were here already."

Just as he pushed open the old wood-framed door, Yuichi's voice greeted him before those other people who worked there. It was an old compact run by an old couple. The faintly illuminated, cozy atmosphere made for Wataru and Yuichi one of the best places where they relaxed from the heart.

"I was surprised. For a second, I thought the meeting time wrong."

The four-seater table a little apart from the counter was their typical spot. Wataru settled into the front seat, and Yuichi set the paperback he was reading on the table and smiled leisurely.

"That's an exaggeration. It's just that I left a little early, so I got here first."

"Yeah. But...it's like..."

"Hn?"

"When I saw you here waiting for me, it reminded me of summer last year."

"Summer last year?"

"Maybe you don't remember. What you remember to me when I arrived late..."

"What's the point of the display dial on your watch?"
His line stolen without a moment's delay, Wataru

start Wataru stopped moving his lips. Well, it seemed he remembered after all. That was what he wanted to say, but suddenly there was something he thought of.

That Kazuki, he really got here early to wait for me...

It was a day a little while after they'd gotten together. Homeroom dragged on long, and Wataru was thirty minutes late for their rendezvous in this cafe. Yuichi's sarcasm and blunt attitude had hurt a little, but afterwards he found out from the old man who worked there that Yuichi had been waiting since a whole hour beforehand. He said Yuichi had looked happily at the clock many times until just before Wataru came running up. When Wataru thought about how he hadn't shown even a shred of that behavior to him, it put him in a mood good enough to burst out laughing.

Right... We were talking about him being repeatedly late just the other day.

More than likely, his guess was right-on. Yuichi had thought it through and arrived beforehand so that this time he could be the one to be here for Wataru, who previously had done all the waiting.

But if I point that out he's sure to deny it.

He tensed his face and shot a glance at Yuichi. As if he thought Wataru's silence meant he had figured it out, Yuichi immediately glared back and said "...What?" with a sullen face. Then, with good timing, the old man inquired into their orders. After they both ordered Earl Grey, with rebounded feelings Wataru opened his mouth.

"What should we do today? I've told Karin that

I'll be late, so I'll go anywhere with you."

"Are you okay on studying? Even if you get an A grade, you still can't relax."

"It's all right. I'm being serious about it. My style of teaching was pretty unique and intense. Once I memorized the essentials, I kind-of started learning English little by little."

"You sure talk brazenly in front of me now."

It was a chilly tone of voice, but his eyes were smiling brightly. Yuichi certainly seemed to have changed a little. It wasn't his charm or stubbornness that must have been starting to feel confident little by little with his ties to Wataru.

"...Well, good enough. We have plenty of time, so let's relax and talk."

"Oh, right. Speaking of talking...that is, I have a little favor to ask you..."

"This is rare. You...asking me?"

"Yeah. You see..."

It was a good chance, so Wataru resolutely decided to break the ice about the auction.

Previously, when the series of uproars over the rings occurred, Yuichi had gotten tired of being the "nice to everyone" honor student and ended up deciding not to lavish civilities on girls any more than necessary. Despite this, he might have been quite unhappy with the idea of passing along a personal possession to public auction. This was because the thought that girls would start a fierce battle over it was easily imaginable. Wataru attempted to explain it as objectively as possible.

with angles in-mind that would not disgust Yuichi.

But...

"I refuse."

As expected, Yuichi's answer left no room for compromise.

"It's ridiculous. What do you mean, auction? First-off, I've already graduated. It's shocking to think that Ryokuyo Fest can't get off the ground just with currently enrolled students. What's more, you want me to hand over a personal item?"

"You don't have to say all that..."

"Unfortunately, I haven't said enough yet. You probably knew that I'd refuse."

"...Yeah, true."

"Then you should have said it was impossible when it came up. Even if I don't contribute, aren't there plenty of other popular people? Ah, but you should consider doing it."

"Me? How did my name come up in this?"

The guns suddenly turned on him, Wataru responded in surprise. Seeing a lover in a favorable light was a frightening thing, and in any case Yuichi seemed to be speaking seriously. He had fallen into a sullen silence and was gazing at the steam from his Earl Grey like it was his sworn enemy. His sulking manner was amusing, and Wataru responded while stifling a smile.

"Look, there's no way anyone's eccentric enough to want something of mine enough to pay money for it."

"Then that makes me quite the eccentric."

"Eh?"

"I carried around a replica of your ring that made myself."

"....."

It sounded a bit self-torturing, but Wataru find no rebuttal. Yuichi had originally given up feelings getting through; he didn't reveal the existence of his similar ring, and he'd hidden his own feelings like that must have caused quite a bit of conflict for someone with as much pride as him.

"Anyway..."

Without his expression relaxing any, Wataru forced the conversation back from starting to stray.

"I appreciate the trouble, but your friends' class will have to do this under their own power. It's not my job to do it."

"Kazukiiii."

"You've got some nerve asking someone to do something without using their title!"

"What, Master Kazuki again?"

"Talk about cold! Why not grant your boyfriend's request? Mas-ter Ka-zuki?"

Suddenly, a teasing voice came down to Wataru from overhead.

A low, deep voice in a sweetly resonant, pleasant tone blended with an absolute, unparalleled sense of power that summoned a disturbance in Wataru's heart. In the case of "him," there seemed to be a hundred ways of imitating totally pleasant characters. Those arrogant eyes...eyes that could only belong to the true winner.

"Big brother..."

Yuichi reflexively put himself on-guard, and with sharp eyes he looked up. At the end of his gaze stood his smiling older brother of a dozen years-difference, Shohei Kazuki. The facial arrangement that gave an impression of fearlessness and the first-class suit-wearing style gave him an adult charm different from Yuichi's. However, Wataru realized more than he cared to in Okinawa that the owner of this at-a-glance accessible smile was actually quite the deceiver.

"What're you doing in a place like this?"

Even though Yuichi immediately snapped at him, Shohei looked composed. He looked down lovingly at his little brother with the flustered attitude, and calmly replied with, "You say such un-cute things."

"What a coincidence, but here we all are. You don't have to look so annoyed, do you?"

"...I am annoyed."

It was whispered, but his gaze was subtly off. For Yuichi, Shohei was, aside from Wataru, the sole counterpart he was convinced he "couldn't beat." Yuichi had grown up watching his brother, who was wild and full of self-confidence, and partially as a reaction he had lived for a long time as an honor student. Maybe that background distinctly differentiated their attitudes as brothers. Shohei seemed to acknowledge that too; even when he was spoken to harshly, the kind color in his eyes did not change.

To say nothing of looks, their attitudes are somehow so similar...

When Wataru again compared the two of them this way, he thought they seemed like the sun and the

moon.

He was the older brother, seeing all through at his own pace, not afraid to involve people.

And then there was the younger brother, paying attention to his surroundings, quietly be only one sticking out from the norm.

The two, who each looked first-rate outside, were amazingly, diametrically opposed inside.

Come to think of it, Yuichi was saying admired his brother...

For someone admired as being "perfect" Yuichi to say something like that, just how terrific this person be? The first time Wataru heard it he was naturally surprised, but it was also true that after actually met Shohei he was convinced. If the man's conspicuous outward appearance and his success in the architectural field were all put together there would be no end to the list of exceptional points, but more than anything Shohei had charm like an inexhaustible spring. It was a fresh, cool spring, filled with an allure that was easy to give yourself over to. As the person closest to him than anyone, Yuichi must have grown up admiring his brother.

"Is it really just a coincidence? This is probably not even your territory."

"Do you think I wear a suit even on my days off? I have a bit of a work-related appointment today, and, Wataru?"

"Uh...yes?"

Now suddenly spoken to, Wataru, who had been lost in thought, nervously raised his head. He had been preoccupied almost totally with Yuichi's reactions, but he was actually the one that had to brace himself for Shohei.

"It's been a while since Okinawa. How've you been?"

"Well. Back then, at the hotel and all, thank you for everything."

"You're welcome. Not that I cooperated once I knew Yuichi had brought a male lover along with him."

"Hey...!"

"Well, thanks to that I took care of everything, so it's all right. Sorry for my rudeness."

Impressively ignoring an angry Yuichi, Shohei grinned invigoratingly. Wataru mumbled while shaking his head; a satisfied-looking smile was brilliantly added in response.

"Tell Yuichi this. That I...will become his enemy."

They were fearlessly uttered words, bringing with them an impression of immense power.

It had been at a luxurious resort hotel in Okinawa that he, said to be an up-and-coming architect, had worked on. In that surreal space, for the first time in his life, Wataru was faced with a reality surrounding Yuichi and himself. That was also the moment when he reflected from the heart that until then they had been blessed with a small number of people who understood, and had been fortunate enough to get by having their fill only of the sweeter aspects of love.

That was why they could not lose. That was what Wataru had determined.

Being approved of by Shohei was, after all, intertwined with their own future.

"Still though, I'm surprised."

Yuichi was over 180cm tall, but Shohei was a few centimeters taller. He stooped that body over agility and, as if peering into his little brother's soul, started talking again.

"Yuichi, I hear you've been really into the Renovation Club. Isn't that a rarity, for you sticking to any one thing? As your brother, I could be more delighted."

"....."

"When we met at the work site the other day, I thought you looked considerably different. Actually, I was secretly anxious that you were going to spend your whole life as a Jack-of-all-trades and master of all trades. Thank goodness."

"Then, I'd rather you'd congratulated me more than this."

Looking up into the downward gaze of Shohei, Yuichi indicated Wataru in front of him with his chin.

"The origin of my tenacity is him, after all."

"K-Kazuki!"

Wataru got flustered over what he'd just heard, but Yuichi's face was grave. Suddenly and openly, about a love-related matter, Shohei was speechless for a brief time, but before long he took a good look at Wataru and murmured "...Hmmm" mischievously.

"Certainly. Those huge dark eyes have a hint of a

audacity. You would go for that."

"Don't go analyzing other peoples' tastes!"

"Oh? All I did was tell the truth."

".....!"

The moment he said that in a fearless tone, Yuichi unexpectedly fell quiet. Shohei smiled a malicious smile, significantly adding "Although with men and women it's totally different." Even when he was hit directly with a mortified look, he didn't appear to pay it any mind at all.

The truth...what does...

The only one left behind in the conversation, Wataru felt a strong curiosity over what Shohei said. It sounded kind of like there was once someone very much like himself who existed for Yuichi. But nothing like that had ever once come up, and he didn't even remember any rumor of it reaching his ears.

Could that mean...the "strictly speaking" partner...?

The first time he had made love with Yuichi, Wataru had been given the confession "Strictly speaking, it's the first time I've ever slept with anyone." In short, it meant that there had been someone he had stopped just short of it with. Of course it was probably a girl, and if they had that close a connection, then the chance that she was going out with Yuichi was high. Wataru had never forced him to say he might talk about it someday when the time was right, but he also never thought he would get a hint from Shohei's own mouth in a setting like this.

Of course, there were girls that I went out with

too, and that doesn't really matter...but...

Although he understood in-theory, his heart was not so easily comforted.

Miserable feelings filled him, and he unconsciously made fists in his lap. Being even a little similar to an ex-girlfriend was definitely uncomfortable. However much a question of taste it was, he could understand being seen overlapped with another person, just a little. Yuichi's gaze was completely his own, but he didn't want to see shadows of the past reflected in those eyes.

"...ru? Wataru?"

"Eh...ah, yes?!"

"Come on, you say something, too. Don't just stare like that, come and convince me as soon as possible. In truth, even I do want to give my blessing to you two, you know?"

Alongside Wataru's depression, Shohei seemed to be scattering ever-unseen. Of course, the only openly hostile one was Yuichi, and Shohei seemed to be enjoying lazily dodging his brother's anger. For Yuichi, who was self-concerned, therefore rarely prone to distraction, to be showing an emotional face was proof that these two were brothers. Shohei was probably proud of this and attacked that angle intentionally many times.

"You probably won't approve of us in the end, anyway."

Yuichi combed his forelocks upward and tried to calm his irritation and dejectedly crossed his arms.

"But, I guess that's understandable. You

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busy, I still haven't really discussed it with you. To be honest I'm disappointed. I thought maybe you'd be a more flexible person. I never thought you'd oppose just because of a same-sex relationship.

"Hey, hey. That you're both men is a good reason to be opposed, I'd say."

"So says society. But I didn't think I'd come from a freewheeler like you."

Eh?, thought Wataru strangely as he watched the exchange. Even though until a second ago he had held sternness in them, when Yuichi voiced his line, somehow it gave a childish impression. Since that time had passed by the time Wataru realized that was a glimpse of the face of the "little brother."

"You shouldn't blame your own lack of sympathy on a lack of sympathy around you."

Shohei might have been feeling the same thing, as contrary to his words he sounded all the more affectionate. Even though Wataru was stressfully in the middle, the voice more than conveyed that both of them did not really hate each other.

"Say, Wataru."

"Y...Yes?"

Suddenly, the inviting gaze slipped from Wataru. This time there was no telling what had slipped into Shohei's mind, as his eyes were quite cunning.

"Tell him it's a problem."

"Eh?"

As Wataru stared, unaware of the meaning, Shohei grinned and once more carefully repeated

same line.

"With a slightly puzzled look in your big dark eyes, tell him 'This is a problem for me.' At his core Yuichi's a nice boy. Of course he can't ignore a request from his precious lover."

"Uh, what are you talking about?"

"Oh come on. Weren't you talking about an auction before? Just as I walked in here, Yuichi's outright refusal came to my ears. That's how I noticed you two were here."

"But, Kazuki's..."

Especially because he was his lover, Wataru did not want to extort him into doing something he didn't want to. What with the subject changing when Shohei appeared, Wataru had already begun to give up on persuading Yuichi. Even so, having it instigated after the fact as it were was problematic.

"But you need Yuichi's cooperation, don't you?"

Beside Wataru's consternation, Shohei's face made it look like there was no problem. Yuichi frowned faintly, and his look became pointed, like he was trying to discern what his brother was up to.

"I, too, think that the auction is an interesting plan. It fits with the times, and if done right it could really make a bang. Ryokuyo is also my alma mater, so I by all means want to make this succeed..."

"Alma mater...really? You're an alumnus, Shohei...?"

"Well, it's no wonder if you didn't know, Wataru. It was over ten years ago."

"Then don't go talking about it now. Besides, I

have no intention of donating anything of mine."

Maybe he was unable to stay quiet any as Yuichi bluntly answered Shohei. Wataru, best felt wrapped in anxiety regarding Yuichi's p arrested by a sense that he himself had somehow denied.

Sharply sensing the change, ostentatiously let out a sigh.

"Hahhh, how sad. Look, Wataru's face completely wounded."

"Wataru...?"

"Well, maybe that can't be helped. Yuichi is this insistent on getting his way, it could seem that Wataru's manner of asking left something desired. It was probably earthshaking. His boy causing problems, after all."

"That's not the issue..."

"I mean, doesn't the fact that you're not mean that Wataru's charm only goes so far?"

Hearing it declared in a tone full of confidence, Yuichi completely ran out of things to say. S reasoning was overly gratuitous, but it was in reality nothing changed the fact that Wataru troubled. In truth, for just a moment there was in his heart while they were talking that it might be true. But however much he had just been wavering, conclusion was too extreme and he quickly admitted himself. Measuring his own value by his p attitude was more despicable than he would anything to do with.

"Don't talk like an idiot."

Yuichi spoke amazedly in a deeply restrained tone.

"I simply don't want any part of a stupid plan. It has nothing to do with Wataru."

"What an exaggeration. It's just a culture festival gathering. Don't take it so seriously."

"It's letting something I use a lot go to who knows who for money!"

"Ah-hahh."

Suddenly, Shohei's eyes sparkled like he had perceived something. Based on previous examples, this was a danger signal. Wataru and Yuichi thought this at the same time, but they were unable to stop him.

"I get it. You didn't like it that it was Wataru who asked you."

"Wha...?!"

"I was extremely surprised at how particular you had become, but in that case I get it, too. That's true; even though you don't know who will make the winning bid for something of yours, when it comes to Wataru you seem perfectly fine with it. When if he's your boyfriend, you should at least feel a little bit strange about it...you know?"

Being called "boyfriend" for the second time, Wataru was getting tired of it. For the most part, rules like "If he's your boyfriend you should do this" were nonsense, and it very much did not seem like Shohei himself would believe such a thing. While Wataru muttered internally that he wouldn't be taken in, as if making doubly sure Shohei said:

"Yuichi, isn't it really that you wanted Wataru to

be jealous of you?"

"What're you talking about...?"

"Don't be stubborn, just honestly say it. I've always been this way. You pretend not to like me, but you're really interested in, and you cop this odd rebellious attitude. You really are contrary."

Naturally, they were not just brothers in name only. Yuichi would probably be reluctant, but at that point alone Wataru shared Shohei's opinion. In this situation he got the feeling that his reading was not necessarily mistaken. He didn't think about it too deeply, but the roles were reversed here, Yuichi probably from the start would not have tried to negotiate for a donation from Wataru.

"Uh...hey, Kazuki..."

"What?"

"Is that really true? I wasn't jealous, so why...?"

"Of course that's not why!"

It was promptly and strongly denied by his annoyed expression copiously communicating his affirmation. Wataru suddenly felt like running away after carelessly asking an insensitive question, afterwards an awkward silence lingered.

"Uh-oh, did I say more than I should have?"

Shohei again cut in, in a tone that showed he was obviously enjoying himself.

"But I just thought I'd try to support Wataru."

"Enough."

Yuichi bit his lip hard once, and then let out a great sigh. One could guess from his emotion-killing

flat tone that he was quite angry. The cold gaze aimed at his brother was chilling enough to make the watching Wataru flinch.

"I'll donate something to the auction. Then you should have nothing to complain about."

"Kazuki..."

"I'm tired of listening to you go on about boyfriends and jealousy over something like this. Wataru, that's how it is, so be sure to tell your class that I've consented. All right?"

"But...uh..."

"Let's go. If we let him keep us here any longer, our day off will be ruined."

Yuichi spoke his words in-parting and tried to grab the check. But, an instant beforehand, Shohei's right hand snagged it from in front of him. Glaring at him sullenly, Yuichi roughly stood up from his seat. A touch-and-go air of tension arose between him and his brother, who waved the check around at head level.

"Stop screwing around."

Before long, Yuichi snatched the check back and immediately headed away from the table. Hurriedly following him, Wataru bowed to Shohei as if they had passed on the street. From the side he nodded back and softly said "What a fool" to himself. The voice that even now sounded like it would burst into laughter was faint enough to be construed as hearing things.

"Thank you very much. We'll come again."

At the register, Yuichi smiled like a different person as he accepted change from the old man. He had a gentle, elegant, kind smile that would calm anyone. He

was probably mad as all hell on the inside, and as a result it was an impressive about-face. Wataru was miffed, but on the other hand he suddenly recalled Masanobu's face.

Even though what made them up was totally different, in the end there were moments when Wataru and Yuichi overlapped in mood. Otherwise, Wataru probably would have, without hesitation, hit Masanobu at the point in time when he kissed him. Wataru's confusion and sadness at the expression that someone seemed to seek help, and was thus unable to refuse. It was because it closely resembled a face Yuichi showed him when a trivial misunderstanding led Wataru to pull out "I lost the ring."

"Hey, what gives? We're leaving."

As Wataru wordlessly allowed the pain in his chest to pass, Yuichi tapped him on the shoulder, as if to get him moving.

When he opened the aged door, the side passage was flooded with sunlight and engulfed in a gold glow. Wataru regained his wits and tried to walk back to Yuichi, but for some reason he stopped after taking a few steps.

"Kazuki? Don't stop all of a sudden like this."

"Well, hello, Kazuki..."

Wataru's heart pounded loudly at the familiar voice. When he looked timidly from behind Yuichi, as he thought, there was Masanobu smiling elegantly. As he had just now been thinking about Masanobu, he felt extremely awkward somehow. Moreover, this was the first time he had come face-to-face with

since being kissed.

"This is a surprise. I never thought I'd see you here. Has Shohei come already?"

"...Yeah."

"Okay. I might have kept him waiting, then. It's unheard of him to be at an appointment punctually. He shows up ridiculously early, or hours late. Has he always been that way?"

"Looks like his partner's doing the choosing."

When Yuichi answered curtly, Masanobu made a complex face and wondered "Is he making fun of me...?" That carefree bearing was no different from how he had been until now, and Wataru was somewhat wrapped in relief. At this rate, he might be able to get by with simple pleasantries. He got up the nerve to step forward, and Masanobu quickly fastened his gaze in his direction, breaking into a grin.

"So, you were together after all. It's been a while since we last met, Wataru."

"Uh...hi. That it has."

"Well, we have stuff to do. If you make my brother wait too long, he'll sulk."

Before hardly anything had been said, Yuichi tried to forcefully end the conversation. But in this case, that was probably to be expected. The image of Wataru and Masanobu together had to produce a mental state in Yuichi akin to his insides boiling. Regardless of how or what was "declared," a situation with the three of them together in reality could not remain calm.

Masanobu of course did not say anything either. As it was an unexpected reunion, perhaps he too was

taken aback on the inside. Showing rare faint eyes, he looked back and forth from Wataru to Yu a troubled fashion.

"Yeah...true. It's Sunday after all, so en See you later."

"Asaka... "

"Good luck with your studies. If you could tutor you anytime."

"....."

As any response seemed to be hypoc Wataru did not open his mouth. If he uttered false graces it would hurt Masanobu, and if he worried him it would make Yuichi feel uncomfortable. It to of Wataru's might to bow his head wordlessly, and pathetic for not being able to do anything else. On or another he managed a piece of a smile, and as h urged, he fell slowly into step beside Yuichi. He realized that if he didn't better prepare his heart, h a natural conversation with Masanobu would be difficult. But...

"Sorry, hold on."

In contrast with before, a brooding restrained Wataru. Following it were light foot then his right arm was grabbed with a jerk from be Standing on the opposite side, Yuichi quickly thr sharp glance in that direction, but Masanobu gav heed to it whatsoever. Peering into Wataru's bewil face, he said with a serious look:

"Just ten minutes."

"Eh...eh?"

"I just need ten minutes, so could you gi

some time?"

"Ah, uh, but..."

"Please."

Until now, this was the first time he had ever seen Masanobu so un-composed. For a moment Wataru was at a loss for words, and in dismay he sought for aid from Yuichi with his eyes. It was a straight and bold approach for Masanobu, who was always so composed and mature. Swallowed up by that directness, Wataru's mind could not work one bit on how to answer. As he repeated "What do I do?" to himself over and over, with a whiff Yuichi sighed. An expression that all but said "Good grief" slightly lessened the degree of tension in the situation.

"What will you do, Wataru?"

"....."

"You don't have to worry about me. You decide."

"Kazuki... "

That was definitely not negligence; rather, it had some kind of warm sound to it. Wataru had been shaken up by the unexpected development, but the moment that sound reached his ears his calm suddenly returned to him. He felt that he had been kindly rebuked to keep his head together, and then he promptly made up his mind.

"...All right. Then as Shohei is also waiting, let's go back inside."

"You're sure?"

"It doesn't have to be the two of us alone. I was thinking also I needed to talk to you properly, Asaka. It's just...I had prior plans with Kazuki today, so really, just

ten minutes. Is that all right with you?"

Masanobu nodded, and then as if startled by the loss of the right hand he had grasped. Wataru realized that even this calm person had moments of discomfort, and it made his chest hurt somewhat.

Whatever face he was shown, Wataru was unable to reciprocate those feelings. All of his feelings were carried by Yuichi, and Wataru could not be set free. The invisible key was sealed in the rings, and even Yuichi did not know the means by which to undo their bond. Of the kind of love they had, he thought.

I respect Asaka, and I like him...but I have no way sure to convey my own feelings.

The fact was, no matter what attitude he showed, Yuichi's existence was irreplaceable. If Masanobu and they could not meet again, it was certainly unfortunate, but it couldn't be helped. Not with romantic love, but if he could just connect with Masanobu in some way...Wataru hoped for an answer, but if he was not to be for romance given the opportunity, Wataru would have no words to answer with.

"All right, Kazuki. Sorry, but wait for me."

Wataru started to speak as cheerfully as possible, so as not to cause any unnecessary worry.

"Wataru..."

"Huh...?"

Yuichi's arms casually reached out and wrapped around Wataru's back. He was hugged tightly, and that it seemed audible, and his defenseless body was hot all at once. Enveloped in his boyfriend's warmth, a sigh naturally overflowed from Wataru's lips. And

on sounded from their overlapped chests, and he zzy enough to faint. Inside the world's kindest he thought strongly from the bottom of his heart e needed nothing else.

"Go on and go."

As suddenly, just as he'd embraced him, Yuichi d his arms away. Wataru nodded, still half-feeling was in a dream, and he heard a deeply meaningful er in his ear: "I'll be waiting at my place."

"I was a little...surprised."

"I, I'm sorry. Uh, I didn't think Kazuki would e that either...!"

Back at the table in the cafe, Wataru's face was red as he sat facing Masanobu. He knew that the n embrace had been to restrain Masanobu, but had never behaved like that in public, so just bbering it made his face feel like it was on fire.

"Well, it's okay. I was unreasonable and got in y of your date."

"No, you..."

"It's okay. It really doesn't bother me."

Wataru's apparent sense of world-weariness ave been quite funny, as Masanobu smiled when ke.

A little removed from the two, Shohei was ely reading a paperback as he drank his second coffee. It was the translated courtroom suspense that Yuichi had left behind. When he saw Wataru asanobu walk in together, he was seemingly wise h to somehow take in the situation, as he signaled sanobu to give him a heads up when they were

done, then quickly returned to the printed world.

For better or worse, there were no customers inside. Wataru felt a slight hesitation. Shohei could probably hear their conversing voices, as there wasn't much time, he decided not to worry about it. In any case, something could probably be said by the awkward atmosphere, and if he clumsily smoothed over his dignity it would be all the more towards Masanobu.

"Asaka, uh...you might think it's a bit of this..."

"This is about me kissing you?"

"....."

Hearing it put so lightly yet directly, he didn't know how he should answer. Now that Wataru was already at a loss for words, Masanobu said very calmly to the end:

"There's no excuse for that. I'm really sorry for being overbearing."

"Asaka... "

"I knew that you were delirious over me, but I couldn't control the impulse. I was quite sure of myself. It had been a really long time since I had kissed you without thinking of the consequences that way."

"You mean it's happened in the past...?"

After hearing that unexpected line, Masanobu spoke without thinking. Masanobu's expression became just a tad embarrassed, and sat stiffly back in his seat.

"Maybe...since the time I heard about the accident."

"Ah..."

"Of course, the situations are totally different. What I mean is...I got carried away for even a second. You know, that kind of thing."

"....."

Now what should he do? He shouldn't have asked so carelessly.

Wataru furiously regretted it, but it was already too late. At this point it would be best just to convey what was necessary and then leave without a moment's delay. He could not be a replacement for a dead girlfriend, and having the relationship Masanobu wanted was not possible at all.

Kazuki...

With his right hand Wataru softly pressed down on the ring on his left ring finger. The cold sensation of silver his fingertips touched calmed his roiling heart little by little. He took a small breath, prepared himself, and stared back at the eyes full of melancholy before him. Facing himself mirrored there, Wataru summoned his courage and tried to open his mouth.

"...Wataru."

"Uh...y-yes?"

Grandly nipped in the bud, suddenly tension rested on both his shoulders. Whether he knew Wataru's mentality or not, with a whiff Masanobu smiled prettily, and in a permeating tone continued:

"I really am thankful to you. Thank you."

"Thankful...?"

"I was able to have feelings for someone again. To think I wanted someone from the heart."

"....."

"I had been about to give up; that's how I was. When I lost Yuina...all I thought about was I had done nothing but hurt her. I never wanted to be someone important again, and I was afraid of being too. I made myself out to be the main character of a tragedy, and did nothing but look back at the past."

Masanobu's words had the gallant sound of a man who has recognized his own weakness. His confession must have meant that a small change had visited him as well. Maybe it could not be said to be a complete breakthrough, but those eyes were clearly looking in a different direction than they had been until now.

"I love you."

The clear sound, devoid of any impurity, was aimed directly at Wataru.

"I didn't think these feelings strange since I was a boy. But, probably...ever since the time I first saw you together with Kazuki in here, I've loved you."

"Asaka..."

"You have Kazuki. So, I won't tell you to love with me. But right now I'm very happy that I'm able to see someone as being loveable. It may be a bother for you, but I suppose I can just go on loving you. I'll be pushy like I was again."

His words were seeking approval, but there was no hint of frivolity or bluffing. Wataru accepted the confession delivered with Masanobu-esque gracefulness. The decision that he had to say something steady and meaningful in the face of this sincere admission.

In the end, Wataru was unable to say anything. No one had the right to deny the very feelings.

falling in love with someone.

Not even if they involved elements of chaos.

Wataru left the shop wearing a complicated expression.

Shohei let his glance flit from the paperback to Masanobu after he approached his table.

"Sorry to make you wait while I dealt with personal things, Shohei."

"You really..."

"Yes?"

With his usual handsome smile, Shohei suddenly stopped in mid-sentence. That confession was certainly outside the range of his reckoning, though not a fragment of surprise was to be found in his expression. Huh, that was lame... He muttered in his heart, and came to seriously want to know why that dark-eyed boy was so popular with guys. Yuichi and Masanobu were both extraordinarily handsome men who, on the whole, had no problem with women, and he knew that they actually were quite popular with them.

So, still...of all things, a younger man...

Shohei was always standing over someone, taking the reigns of leadership, so he was quite confident in having an eye for people. Neither of these two were gay by nature, and perhaps after this neither of them would have any interest in another man. In other words, that was how troublesome an opponent Wataru Fujii was.

"Excuse me. Might I get some fresh black tea at this table?"

While Shohei was thinking about Masanobu went ahead and ordered his own drink. he observed that candid attitude, Wataru, who had if weighed down, came to seem all the more pitiful. Shohei almost inadvertently laughed out-loud.

"Uh...did you just remember something funny?"

"No. You know, that move was out of bounds."

"Huh?"

Masanobu sat in front of him and responded dubiously. To an outsider, he might have appeared composed, but his insides might have been at breaking point.

Shohei elegantly shifted his legs, and with one elbow on the table said pleasantly:

"When someone is confessed to in that way they have nowhere to run."

"Ohh...right..."

"No, not 'right.' Here I thought I might offend you if you had been more calculating."

"To be praised for something like that... doesn't even come to think of it, you're against them seeing each other. In that case, I make the perfect spoiler. Unfortunately, though, I will not move according to your will. What you despised by Wataru would create problems."

Taking the newly delivered cup of tea in his hand, the ever-smiling Masanobu replied.

"Well, I have no intention of stopping Wataru from coming up the staircase. Just, perhaps today's confession was unfair. I was so intent on communicating my

feelings, and I didn't have room to think that far ahead. I've done something pitiful to Wataru..."

"Shall I assist you?"

"And thereby amuse yourself again?"

Like taking a mischievous child to task, Masanobu wrinkled his brow. But Shohei's smile did not collapse at all, as he awaited his response. The coals had been lightly kindled in regards to the auction, but if he was going to really shake things up, Masanobu was the most qualified for the job. It was probably impossible to manipulate someone clever like him 100%, but the harder a card was to play, the greater its effects.

"Hey, Masa."

While he would use full names in public, Shohei used nicknames for those he considered personnel. With a vague sense of warning, Masanobu replied, "What is it?"

"Uh-oh. You being in a good mood means I need to be careful, Shohei."

"You know, Yuichi is dear to me."

"....."

"Because he seems to be blessed, and the basis for that was always my own sacrifice. Lately, the rewards of that have little by little come to fruition, and his social charm has increased. So, from now on I want him to lead a life that's truly envied by all."

In reality, Shohei knew the truth; Yuichi's elegant change had a lot to do with the presence of Wataru. But nevertheless, depending on how he regarded their relationship, he would be consciously subjecting his little brother to certain misfortune and difficulty in the

near future.

Right now, it was all right since they both live by just gazing at each other. However, if Yuichi entered society, a same-sex lover would become an inconvenience in every sense of the word. Shohei was able to accurately foresee this, and he wanted to avoid this being the cause for his pain. Of course, even if it happened he could not stick up for him to any extent. But Yuichi seemed proud to endure his brother's protection forever. If Shohei had a wife and child he had to protect.

"What do you mean, by your own sacrifice?"

Met with a suspicious look, Shohei realized Masanobu had taken an interest in his scheme.

"The Kazuki I know doesn't look like he would carry around something that gloomy."

"Of course not. I'd sooner it be such a trivial thing."

"Yes, well..."

"Anyway, I, the eldest son, was a kind of truly independent spirit, so I wasn't the type to receive the affection of my parents. Since I was a grade-schooler I'd take off somewhere and come home for days, and go where my curiosity led me regardless of the effects around me. Even if my parents would rush to the police or go to my school to apologize; there was never a moment's pause for them. Just when they were quite exhausted, they were unexpectedly blessed with Yuichi. So of course, where their hopes were focused."

Masanobu listened with a complex expression.

s about his rival in love, and he probably thought e, wondering why Shohei had started in about ut, if Shohei told his side of the story to some t would make it easier to win Masanobu over at t time. So, paying no mind, he continued.

You can also see my parents' feelings from how d "ichi," the kanji for "one," in the second son's an't you? To top it off, Yuichi turned out well hey'd hoped. They probably never expected me down and even give them a grandchild. Still, to was no doubt their star of hope."

"Huhh..."

"However..."

He changed his tone entirely, and this time his s serious.

Yuichi, who carried the hopes of the family, ings found himself a same-sex lover. I don't here he lost his footing, but it's a complete in his life. It might conceivably be a temporary ance, but if he stays with Wataru this way, he lly hope for true happiness. Though, this might ersuasive at all for someone like you who's in ed love with the same partner..."

"What surprises me is that this is the kind of ou're opposed."

"Oh yeah?"

"I mean, listening to your story, aren't you the o's walked a path more reckless than anybody? that, to take a sensible opinion only towards ther's love life...is unfair."

"Didn't I tell you? Yuichi's dear to me."

Snapping the cover of the book on the table, his index finger, Shohei displayed a lovely smile.

"This book was in my room at my house. Yuichi forgot it when he left."

"....."

"You wouldn't want to purposefully praiseworthy little brother like him walk in a shadow, would you?"

Masanobu fell silent again. Maybe he was reorienting his thinking along the lines of "On wish for a happy life." But, Shohei was confident he wouldn't give up on Wataru that way. On the contrary, he was unmistakably deepening his feelings more. The big obstacle of his lover's relatives definitely tormented Wataru at times, and there couldn't be people who would hold out a hand at times like this.

"Therefore, how about this?"

Not letting the sudden chink in the armor of him, Shohei spoke with a smile:

"Hang out with me the weekend after next."

"S-Sure, fine by me..."

"Actually, there's a culture festival at Wataru's school. It seems his class is holding an auction of personal items from popular students. A fitting place for Ryokuyo High, eh?"

"That school is famous in this area for having a liberated school spirit. Lots of students who stand out there, and it gets talked about a lot. But, why to a culture festival...?"

"Yuichi's going to donate to that auction."

For a moment, Masanobu showed a bewi

expression at Shohei's remark. Seeing Wataru and Yuichi together would only serve to make him feel empty. Besides, with a festival atmosphere going on, his going there might cause an unnecessary distraction for Wataru.

But with a voice full of confidence Shohei negated his doubt.

"As for the points you're worried about, it's okay. There'll be no problems."

"Eh...?"

"Those two will be separate on the day in question. Yuichi...yes, maybe some other girl will be attached to him. Wataru probably won't be amused, and will probably be depressed."

"How can you know something like that?"

Masanobu wore a baffled expression at the manner of speaking that sounded like a prophet's. Experiencing a sense of satisfaction at causing such a face, Shohei said with deep meaning:

"How...? Because that's the direction I've pushed things in."

"...I thought it was probably something like that."

After hearing about the conversation with Masanobu, Yuichi folded his arms and sighed.

"Kazuki... "

"I guess the gist is, he did all the talking and then you left."

"....."

That was of course the case, but Wataru did have an explanation. After leaving the cafe to head over to

Yuichi's apartment, his head was so completely up that he couldn't even think to make one phone call. Even so, he did realize that Yuichi was waiting for him, so it occurred to him that it wasn't wise to cold stare that he was facing.

"I needed to refuse him clearly...I really mean to."

Sitting on the floor, Wataru looked up at Wataru's reserved glance at Yuichi sitting on the bed.

"But when he said it that way, I couldn't do anything... I mean, think about it. I've never had a person so close to me die, but I can at least imagine it's not an ordinary sadness."

"Uh-huh?"

"So...Asaka's always encouraging me regarding you. And yet, he said 'thank you' to me. When I thought about that...it made my chest hurt..."

It was no use. When he talked about it, he couldn't hear Masanobu's voice again. Wataru hurriedly averted his eyes, and endeavored to shake off the lingering memory of the confession. It seemed like if he just a bit more open, he'd be arrested by those painful words.

Wataru had heard a lot of words since he was together with Yuichi. Some sweet, some painful, but all of them were precious treasures that permeated his heart.

However...

"I suppose I can just go on loving you."

It was the saddest, most serene confession Wataru had ever known.

He thought he was definitely at-fault for not being able to give a clear warning. But, if there was someone capable of saying "I don't wish for you to love me, it bothers me. Please stop," he would like to meet them.

Maybe he sensed the internal murmuring, as the sharpness ebbed a little from Yuichi's eyes. Wataru's relief at seeing this lasted only a moment, as in a disheartened tone Yuichi said, "This might have been planned, you know."

"Asaka knows your personality well. He might have figured as long as he appealed to your sympathy it would work out somehow. Sure enough, you weren't able to refuse him."

"Oh, come on!"

Naturally getting angry, Wataru's voice became violent and he glared at Yuichi. Masanobu was not the type of person to use some makeshift tactic like utilizing pain from his past. Wataru knew full-well that he still thought dearly of his dead girlfriend even now. On top of that, how could Yuichi take such a malicious viewpoint when Wataru was worried over having been told "I love you"?

"I know you don't have any good will towards Asaka."

Wataru felt somehow downhearted, and he stood up weakly.

"But I'm disappointed that you'd talk that way. I'm going home."

"All I did was simply state a possibility, so why are you getting so upset?"

"Because, I mean...!"

"Even if we don't know whether he was mercenary, it doesn't change the fact that we're forced to move at his pace. You...and me."

"Kazuki..."

When it was put that way, Wataru could deny it in his head. Even though there was no way he could respond to Masanobu's feelings, he had even had his chance to refuse him taken away. The result was that it was clear that Masanobu's existence would continue to be caught up with the two of them, and he could ignore that there was a chance that could subtly damage his relationship with Yuichi.

"You know, now my head's mixed up again."

Wataru muttered like he was tired, and Yuichi called to him with a wordless beckon. To obey seemed annoying, but right now Wataru wanted warmth, and Yuichi could calm him. He haltingly sat next to him, and Yuichi's left hand slowly clasped his shoulder and pulled him closer. Wataru softly closed his eyes and peacefully inclined his head.

If possible, Wataru didn't want to talk to Masanobu anymore today. Even though he was happy that they had a whole day to spend together, they had even as much as kissed. If there were words to say, he wanted to talk about the two of them. If fingers were meant to feel, he wanted them to seek.

"...Kazuki."

"Hn?"

"Are you sure about the auction?"

"What, now? This way you can save face v

people in your class. Be happier about it."

"Sure, I think everyone will be happy. Hey, do you remember Mai Tachibana from my class?"

Yuichi had been sickeningly popular amongst current students, but even among them Mai was special. This was because Wataru happened to be present on the scene when she confessed to Yuichi before the two of them were in love. The original reason their rings got exchanged at the hallway sink was that Wataru was washing his face in an effort to relieve the hangover he had from drinking with Kawamura after Kawamura had been jilted by Mai.

"Yeah, I remember. You mean that time you were lurking around and shadowing me."

"Lurking, huh?"

"So, what about her? She was pretty cute, now that you mention it."

The downward gaze seemed to be teasing, and Wataru grew sullen again.

"Tachibana and Kawamura are both on the executive committee. And she was the one who first asked if you could be dragged into the auction..."

"Really..."

"Ah, you look like you couldn't care less about it. In other words, it looks like she still has a thing for you. She got really quiet after the rumor went around that you were dating Karin."

"....."

So, what does that have to do with me?

That was what Yuichi's expression seemed to say, and Wataru thought bitterly that he was the one who

should have felt unamused.

"In other words, if I was jealous of each every woman who tried to woo you I'd collapse the weight. So, it's not like I'm cool with you jettisoning one of your things over to someone..."

"...Not cool?"

"That is...maybe what Shohei is saying...bothers me after all..."

Perhaps he was excessively self-conscious. While Wataru was talking he gradually lost confidence, and his voice almost faded out. If Yuichi was concerned over that point, Wataru at least wanted to avoid misunderstanding and have him feel good about donating, but maybe he was way off on this.

Did I somehow let myself get good and worried up by Shohei...?

He could hardly contain himself from shouting "I take it back!" at Yuichi. But it was too late now. It looked like all he could do was secretly feel bad about the unnecessary shame he had incurred.

Beside Wataru, who was immersed in his self-aborrence, Yuichi opened his mouth with an exceedingly serious face.

"About my brother..."

"Wha?"

"When he was at Ryokuyo, he was student council president."

"Shohei was...president...?"

It had nothing to do with the subject at-hand, but the image was such a perfect fit that Wataru unthinkingly felt admiration. Yuichi had openly hated club activities.

and so he never took a position of that kind, but Shohei indeed seemed like he would take the initiative and stand before the public.

"It's true. Teachers who were around then still talk about him."

"Why...?"

"This."

Yuichi let the left hand that had been holding Wataru's shoulder dance before his eyes. Wataru honed in on the familiar silver ring shining on his ring finger, and while confused asked "...What's the big idea?" Yuichi had had his ring off a lot lately as he had gotten busy with the circle, but even he seemed to have been looking forward to today's date. Of course, Wataru's ring finger as well had the same ring shining on it.

"Our school doesn't make much of a fuss over accessories like this, do they?"

"...No."

"But a long time ago rules were strict. Piercings and rings were out of the question, and for that matter even hair dying and perms were banned. There were also regulations on uniform length and girls' hairstyles, so it seems it was a terribly strict school atmosphere."

"....."

That was an extremely unexpected reality for the Ryokuyo that Wataru now knew. With the exception of special cases like tattoos and girls' make-up, by current school regulations a student's personal appearance was left up to them to a certain degree. Therefore, it was not a matter of whether public morals were disturbed. The students chose accessories that provided a balance with

their uniforms; not flashy things that stood out, but naturally simple things had become more mainstream.

"My brother changed that."

His left hand returned to Wataru's shoulder as he murmured that slowly.

"He promised to reform school regulations with an emphasis on student independence and consciousness. After he was elected council president with that promise behind him, he effectively led the students and was successful in negotiating with the school."

"For-real...?"

"The laughable thing is, his incentive for reforming the regulations was, 'I wanted to try bleaching my hair once.' The day after the new rules went into effect, he shows up at school with bleach-blonde hair. It surprised everyone was inspired that the student council president took the initiative and broke the mold, but in reality, it wasn't all that impressive. I heard him explaining to my parents that way when they went pale at the color of his hair."

It was a Shohei-like episode, but Wataru could not immediately find any words to speak. He had the impression that Shohei wanted to make everything a bit more flashy, but he didn't think he would go so far as to change school rules just to fulfill his own wishes.

"My brother's definitely special. Making a deal out of things is his hobby, or you could say he finds it fun to create trouble... Isn't it amazing?"

"Kazuki..."

"In short, the rings that link us together are connected to his actions, if you go back to the start."

"....."

Within the silence, the hand grasping Wataru's shoulder squeezed tightly. Yuichi's profile was composed, but Wataru could tell that inside there was continuing conflict over how to put an end to the antagonism with his brother.

"I did let him have his way regarding the auction, though."

"Eh...?"

"I thought if that conversation had kept going, who knows what no-good thing he'd think of next? Besides, I was uncomfortable with how he likes to provoke you for-kicks. It doesn't take much for you to take something seriously. ...Like, about my tastes."

Yuichi suddenly touched on a topic that was smoldering in a corner of Wataru's heart. Considering how until now he had seemed unconcerned about such things, the truth that Yuichi really was thinking about it surprised Wataru.

Wataru was held tightly and didn't stir an inch, but he noticed that his pulse had sped up. Even though he had just said "if I was jealous of each and every one I'd collapse under the weight," he was ashamed of himself for being envious of something that happened before they met.

"I certainly do like your face, Wataru."

Yuichi's gaze settled on the embarrassed Wataru's face.

"Even though your dark eyes are large your expression's strong. It's determined, audacious, and once in a while flustered."

"What's that all about...?"

"I don't get tired of looking at it, it's so interesting."
And then..."

"Eh..."

"It's unlike anyone else's."

Together with the smiling voice, his lips slowly approached.

Yuichi stopped once a sigh's distance away with a whisper wetted Wataru's lips.

"For instance, no matter what words my brother or Asaka say."

"Kazuki..."

"Don't shake, Wataru."

Even though there was no reason for it, Yuichi purposefully called attention to the shaking. It was probably because he wanted to see Wataru grow up and deny it. Wataru felt that that was where he was Shohei's brother, but the so-close-and-yet-so-far wore down his patience, and the trivial meanness to not mean anything.

"I love you...Kazuki..."

Perhaps the honest words pleased Yuichi, at least when he kissed him. The overlaid lips added a little by little, and the unconscious sigh that crept up was carefully arrested by his tongue. Just like taking an exquisite candy, the inside of his mouth was covered with delicate sensations. The gently scattering sound of the kiss lit a fire in Wataru's body, and the tender ache was repeated until it became a captivating ache.

"Ka...zuki..."

The voice spilling from between his lips

already shrill and tinged with heat. Holding Wataru, Yuichi slowly relaxed his weight, and before Wataru knew it he was held down on the bed.

"Unlike anyone else's..."

"Huh?"

"Is that really true...?"

Even though they held each other this tightly, the anxiety did not seem to want to leave. Grabbing Yuichi's arm in a badgering manner, Wataru thinly opened his eyes and queried. If even a little doubt rose in those eyes it might smash his heart. Maybe he sensed that feeling, as Yuichi left a trace of a smile behind and made his voice resound sincerely:

"There's no one in this entire world like you."

"Kazuki..."

Hearing that said with no hesitation, the pressure in Wataru's chest disappeared like a falsehood. That works, thought Wataru as he closed his eyes. Until he knew the truth someday, he quietly put a seal on this subject for now.

Maybe Yuichi noticed that small resolution, as a deliberately gentle voice poured into Wataru's ears.

"Wataru, remember this. What can make you smile, make you angry..."

"....."

"Make you cry...is only me."

Maybe that last line was what he had said to Masanobu. Wataru felt vaguely that the fact that he had inadvertently shown tears in front of Masanobu was what had created their present complicated relationship. But more importantly, right now he wanted to share the

desire that had just awoken.

"I love you, Wataru..."

"Yeah...and me you..."

Reached out once again, a mist settled over Wataru's head. He felt heat gathering in the nape of his neck, and tried taking a very deep breath. Lured by that indication, Yuichi raised his face once and suddenly smiled at close range. His gaze was lovely, and a smile naturally emerged on Wataru's face, too.

The warmth of their bodies overlaid, bringing forth a slight, passing fever. After exposing his bare skin before Yuichi, Wataru lapsed into enchanted hallucinations over and over. However many times he was embraced that pleasantness did not fade, and desire stirred and awakened in him. Controlled by the sensations of Yuichi's fingers, tongue, and lips, Wataru's body opened as if in invitation, and before he knew it began to take on a faint color.

"It's getting...dark outside..."

"Wow, Wataru. You're relaxed today."

As Wataru answered with a laugh, Yuichi easily flung off his shirt. As always, Wataru admired in his heart the pretty way in which Yuichi's muscles were formed. They were slender yet supple, and their movement flowed. Of course, Wataru had no idea to realize that Yuichi found his nakedness dazzling. This was because before he could read his partner's expression he was unable to do anything beyond nodding over with a sweet voice.

"...Nn...!"

In Yuichi's hands Wataru's core changed

growing hot and excited. Next, kisses were scattered around the hollow of his collarbone and over his chest. He was unable to endure his rising breath, and teeth met the nape of his neck as his head was thrown back. He was gradually driven down, and with nowhere to run his whole body was made to tremble.

"Kazuki...Kazuki, I can't..."

"I love you, Wataru..."

"Ah...ahhh...!"

While intercepting Yuichi's passion, Wataru clung tightly to his back.

The repeated whispers sweetly permeated his skin, and he was fulfilled down to the fingertips to the point of pain.

The news that Yuichi had agreed to participate in the auction generated a reaction that took Wataru by surprise.

The announcement built up a reputation before the final decision was made, and word seemed to be spreading further every day. The extent of it did not end within the school: according to Karin, it was all anyone could talk about at other schools, too. The number of students interested in other exhibitors increased vigorously, but even so, the worth carried by "Yuichi Kazuki" was ridiculously high.

"What's more, he himself is coming! Ahh, I wonder how many months it's been since I saw Kazuki..."

"Hey, Tachibana. For the record, it'd be wrong for us in class B to bid in the auction."



"Be quiet. I know that without you telling me!"

"...You guys. Look, we're here now."

Getting fed up with the exchange between Kawamura, who was apparently not thinking anything, and a somewhat excited Mai, Wataru pointed at the family restaurant in front of them. It was now down to one week until Ryokuyo Fest, and the three of them had set out today to consult with Yuichi regarding the auction donation. Because Mai's true intent in insisting they had to visit him at his own place had been so transparent, for now they were simply meeting in a safe place.

I get it... When you think about it, Kazuki no longer lives with his family, so using the rough method of intruding there is now out. All the more reason why having the address of his apartment found out would suck.

Being popular is really tough, Wataru thought when he looked at Yuichi. Despite the fact that even Mai had clearly been turned down by him, her face looked like that had never happened.

The day of the auction might seriously turn out to be incredible...

Just when he unthinkingly came to want to sigh, Mai uttered a small shout of joy. She had spotted Yuichi settled, reading a paperback at a six-seater table near a window.

"Hello, Kazuki, how long it's been!"

When Mai approached quickly and greeted Yuichi in a monotone high voice, the gaze that once made prisoners of many female students shifted quietly this way.

Those gentle and languid jet-black eyes, and expressive...

An elegant, calm manner coloring intellectual good looks.

To Wataru, who was completely used to malicious tone and high-and-mighty attitude, the Yuichi that everyone knew almost seemed like a different person. But with this transfiguration, he could understand. Yuichi was Ryokuyo's inimitable "prince" that even going to other nearby schools longed for.

"Ahh, you were...Tachibana. And, you're..."

"Kawamura! ...Kawamura."

"Right, right, I knew it was something like that. Sorry, I only remember you as 'Alternate.'"

Although he had been told it last time, Yuichi's approach was following a delicate line, whether it was spontaneous or on-purpose. Wataru almost unthinkingly burst out laughing at the scene of Yuichi's grin and Kawamura's stiff smile. But, Mai was watching, and her friendly attitude seemed wise. Hurriedly finishing his expression, with a cool face, Wataru too said "Hello" and bowed his head.

"Thank you for meeting with us today. I hope everything goes well."

"As do I."

Yuichi closed the paperback he had been reading with a thump and indicated for everyone to sit down. Kawamura and Mai sat next to each other facing Wataru, and Wataru inevitably ended up next to him. There was no doubt that Mai was thinking that an opportunity had been stolen from her, but then she would not have

able to look deliberately into Yuichi's face, so that was probably why she avoided it.

Ho, boy...

Wataru heaved a deep sigh inside, and while Mai was all-smiles explaining the auction, he absent-mindedly gazed at the top of the table. The makeshift-grade coffee they ordered created four tedious pillars of steam. Despite how the talk was now old news, Yuichi inclined his ear sincerely, and was nonchalantly replying how nothing could make him happier as a Ryokuyo alumnus than to be of-use. From his conversation with Mai he first found out that a mountain of invitation letters from current students for Yuichi to come to Ryokuyo Fest had been delivered.

"By the way, you said that I could donate anything I'd like?"

"Yes. As long as it's not food or medicine, anything is fine. But, uh..."

"Eh?"

"If possible, I guess since it's you... I wondered if you'd be happy about something like..."

While adopting a somewhat fawning tone, Mai glanced down towards Yuichi's hands. Kawamura's face grew questioning, and in a low voice he challenged her with "What are you lookin' at?" Somehow or other, Wataru felt a bad premonition, and quietly stole a glance at Yuichi's profile. But there was nothing there but "the famous Yuichi Kazuki," and somehow it felt like he was terribly far away.

I'm such a fool...

Suddenly, forlornness filled his heart, and

Wataru felt a strong self-avhorrence.

If I was going to feel like this, I wish I'd done it when Kazuki first refused...

He was aware that this situation had been instigated by Shohei, and even Yuichi disliked the idea of donating in the first place. Wataru still had not known at the time, but once he truly realized that some part of Yuichi's would be passed along to someone, an inexpressible, complicated feeling spread throughout his whole body bit by bit.

And why am I starting to sound selfish now? point? Kazuki was pushed into this, and we're still managing to negotiate. Yet...

Wataru was thoroughly disgusted at his own selfishness. Carrying a heart full of contradiction, he hated his unfairness in sitting with Mai and the others with an innocent look on his face. He felt ashamed of his lack of imagination and that he had to encounter this last-minute scene to understand exactly how his feelings trembled.

"You didn't like it that it was Wataru who was asking you."

He remembered Shohei's deeply meaningful voice, like he had seen through everything. Maybe the line had been thrown at Wataru through Yuichi. He stirred Yuichi up and made him donate, planting the seed of slightly bad blood between them. Maybe that was what the "What a fool" that slipped out then had meant.

Maybe Kazuki understood...and that's why he was reluctant to donate?

Maybe he knew that Wataru would think

more uncomfortable things than himself. However, because Wataru himself did not understand that then, Yuichi went so far as to appear to act like he was refusing out of his own selfishness.

Kazuki...

If he didn't carefully pick up on it, he would soon overlook Yuichi's kindness. It was because it came out deliberately in a rough attitude that the person in question didn't notice. However, that warmth did not cool, but always cheered Wataru up. Even now, the petty jealousy inside his heart softly lightened.

I really was a fool...

Shohei had seemed to care when he asked whether Wataru was bothered, but come to think of it, a person who would even declare "I will become his enemy" suddenly becoming an ally should have been thought of as strange. Even so, the reason he couldn't hate Shohei was that he knew that he himself was the biggest fool for not being able to see to the bottom of things.

I can't be taken for a ride, he thought.

If Yuichi agreed to donate, there was no call for stupid jealousy.

"In that case, your ring..."

Just when he had finally regained his calm, the word "ring" leapt into his ears. Coming back to himself with a start, Wataru tensed up the moment he realized that word had come from Mai's mouth. Then he noticed that Kawamura was earnestly sending signals with his eyes.

Kawamura? What gives?

Wataru hurriedly asked back, but it seemed already too late. It was more or less reserved. Mai had in a clear tone broached the "main topic" Yuichi.

"Kazuki, you don't wear your ring any more. Why is that?"

"Eh...well..."

"This is brazen of me, but if you're tired of it or you've found some other favorite, I think there are a lot of girls who would want that ring. There was a huge fuss over it, and even though Fujii has one with the same design, he wouldn't tell us where he bought it."

"I've told you dozens of times, I don't remember!"

Shot a quick reproachful glance, Wataru seemed offended and answered back. But without being motivated by it at all, Mai immediately returned to the subject. "And so..."

"If you were to show up, and donate that ring, that got talked about...whatever happens, I think that would be the biggest thing to happen to Ryokuyama since it started!"

"Oy, Tachibana. That's shameless even for you!"

When Kawamura was unable to let it go any further, Mai made her lips purse like it was an excuse.

"Well, I heard that he no longer wears it anymore."

"Who spread an irresponsible rumor like that?"

"Kawamura, don't make fun of a girl's information network. I know a girl who happens to be a member of it."

have tea where Kazuki works...and girls with brothers and sisters at the same college. He stands out wherever he goes, so I hear quite about quite a few sightings. They all want even just a little information."

"....."

"Anyway, everyone takes care not to intrude and cause problems where he works, like what used to happen. You know, on Kazuki's birthday a bunch of girls went to his house and caused a huge disturbance. Since then, he hasn't accepted presents or letters from anyone who's brought them to him, so that's why."

From the start, Kawamura, Wataru...and even Yuichi were too amazed to say anything. Even after graduating Yuichi had always attracted the looks of women, but weird disturbances like the ones during high school had stopped happening, so Wataru was relieved at how much easier it had become to date him.

That means...it was simply a wrong guess...and that's all...?

All at once exhaustion advanced on him, and Wataru felt like he was going to be dizzy. Even at-best, it was a relationship that had to be hidden from the public eye. Now, it looked like they would have to be even more careful.

"We got off-topic, but that's that, so...if possible, I would like you to donate the ring..."

"Not a chance!"

Before he thought about it, Wataru shouted at Mai.

"No chance, I mean...of all things, give up his ring...!"

"Fujii..?"

"Just because he doesn't always wear it, don't go assuming he's gotten tired of it! First of all, didn't you wear that on his left ring finger? Then that must mean Kazuki already had someone he was with. You thought you want even a ring like that? Wouldn't it be futile to offer money for it?!"

"...I don't want to hear something like that from you."

Even though Wataru pressed upon her agitation, Mai's attitude was surprisingly calm. As if blushing merriment until a moment ago had been a mask, she coldly narrowed her lovely eyes.

"You're a guy, so you don't get it, Fujii. What's worth a ring has..."

"Wha..."

"You know, to us Kazuki is on the same level as a celebrity. Everyone watches him from afar and squeals, and we're plenty satisfied with it. If he wore a ring even for a short time, it doesn't matter who it was paired-up with. I mean, it's not like we can actually get out with him."

"Tachibana..."

At the words of the bluntly refused Mai, Wataru received a new shock. Being told that he didn't understand because he was a guy, and even that it didn't matter who was the counterpart, he could no longer find a reason to object.

Of course, Yuichi would refuse to donate. Wataru wasn't especially worried about that. He just didn't want to watch events play out like he was

outsider. That ring was not just some temporary fad. He wanted to tell her not to talk about it like it was her concern.

But...if I did something like that...

Clenching his fists, Wataru desperately suppressed feelings that had no outlet. If he was distracted more than necessary, Mai would certainly find it suspicious. And if their relationship was found out, it would probably cause lots of problems for Yuichi, who had finally found something worth doing and was starting to apply himself.

That's something I can't allow. It'll make Kazuki feel bad. And that's...

Wataru finally prepared himself to step down. But just as he was about to speak with effort...

"Tachibana."

It was not Wataru's but Yuichi's voice that first broke the awkward silence.

"Thank you for all the compliments you've poured on me."

"Ah...no, uh...I'm sorry, I just..."

Naturally she must have felt embarrassed, as Mai took on a fixed countenance. Yuichi gazed at her with a look that concealed gloom, and apparently felt it a little difficult to begin speaking.

"But, I apologize, I can't donate the ring. As Fujii said before, it has a counterpart, and...even now the person most important to me has it."

"So, does that mean it's Fujii's sister...after all?"

"....."

Not even recalling her name, Yuichi fell silent,

as if taken aback.

"That rumor vanished before it was confirmed, but, but is it really true...?"

"...Yeah, actually, it is."

After Yuichi's few words and a nod, Wataru's heart started beating loudly.

"That's why we plan on coming to Ryokuyama together."

"Eh..."

"During the ring incident it caused such a stir, we kept quiet, but I've already graduated, and I think it'd be okay to announce I have a girlfriend."

"..."

Mai was speechless, and Wataru and Karin simultaneously said "Ehh?!" in loud voices. But, Wataru did not even look at the excited pair, and with a neutral expression continued smoothly.

"The reason I'm not wearing the ring now is that I use my hands for my club activities. I'm meeting with them after this today, too. It's the same reason I don't wear it at work. But, I'm sure to have it on dates, and it's always important to me."

"Oh...all right..."

"Sorry. The reason Fujii got angry before was because he's thinking about his sister."

"...Right."

Yuichi faced the dispirited Mai, and gave her a smile, his old honor student smile that said, "I understand, thanks." But, that was hardly the case. Wataru, who had been listening quietly. Even if it was just a makeshift lie that Karin and Yuichi would

together, it was still quite a shock. First of all, if that really did happen, this time they would be officially recognized as a couple.

How nice would it have been to say he didn't want that, in front of everyone?

However, in the end, Wataru could do nothing but keep quiet. After Yuichi had saved the situation so skillfully, there was no way he could go and destroy it all.

I don't understand because I'm a guy, huh...

Mai's thrown-out little thorn pricked at his heart.

If this pain was compensation for their secret, how much would they have to endure before everything was okay?

Wataru quietly muttered to himself, focusing his bitter gaze on the bare ring finger.

"Kazuki..."

After opening the door to the entryway, Wataru was at a loss for words. Just when he was wondering who had shown up this late at night, the one standing outside with a troubled face and who he had just seen yesterday was Yuichi.

"Uh, Kazuki, why...?"

"Sorry for it being ridiculously late. I really meant to come sooner, but the cafe got so busy that I couldn't get away from work. Can you talk a little now?"

"S...Sure, that's fine."

They had been in a relationship for a year now,

but this was the first time he had suddenly visited W at home since the time he heard the turbulent r regarding Masanobu. His actions had been dictated by anger then, but tonight he seemed a little different. He was bewildered over what could be up, from the moment he heard his mother's voice saying "Who is it?"

"If it's a friend of yours; don't talk in the hallway entryway, have them come in."

"...Uh-oh. Your parents are already home today."

Wataru's parents both worked and always came home late, so Yuichi's face looked worried from the sudden. They had met up many times, and they had always seen him as a fine upperclassman, but it was no surprise when they frowned on him coming by when it was already eleven o'clock.

"You don't need to worry about it. Kawamura has been dumped and come by late at night lots of times too."

"Is that so?"

"Uh...well, not recently. Maybe things are starting to more or less go well with Mitsuki."

He could not bear to have Kawamura pounce on again. As Wataru hurriedly tried to take it all away suddenly from the hallway behind them a flustered voice raised with "Ah! Why's Kazuki here?"

"Karin..."

"What the heck, when I'm dressed like this? Darn it!"

"Dressed like what...?"

Karin had just stepped out of the bathroom

was wearing pajamas, with a towel wrapped around her head. Steam curled up from her whole body, and she turned bright red and ran upstairs.

"Whoops, sorry..."

Yuichi murmured in a horribly awkward way after a short silence. His unusually forlorn expression had a quality about it that was hard to dislike, and Wataru smiled wryly as he looked at him again.

Yuichi had come straight from work, and he was dressed in a zipped-up cashmere parka over a T-shirt, and full-length khaki slacks. When they had met him in the family restaurant yesterday, he had been dressed roughly since he was about to go do club work, but there was a sense that when he wore clothes that reflected his true tastes it made the quality of the materials look that much better.

"Anyway, why not come in? You came all this way."

"You sure?"

"It's fine, you're my upperclassman Kazuki. My parents have tons of faith in you."

When Wataru answered with an air of joking, Yuichi finally showed a face like he felt relieved. Then, he laughed modestly and said, "Sometimes having a nice exterior helps, too."

Greeting Wataru's parents before heading towards his room, Yuichi apologized for his rudeness in visiting so late. As Wataru had said there was no problem on that point, and being given tea and a bag of potato chips, they felt somewhat embarrassed as they

settled into Wataru's room.

"It seems kind-of inexcusable. You know one here besides Karin knows that we're more simply upperclassman/underclassman. It feels awkward, deceiving your parents."

"Yeah...but, there's still no other way. The time will come when we have to tell them, but that we've got the problematic opponent Shohei with."

"Problematic opponent?"

Yuichi was sitting on the floor with his back against Wataru's bed, and he suddenly let out a sigh. Wataru worried that he was probably tired from work. Yuichi looked downward and said:

"I thought I'd discuss with you what happened yesterday."

"Right... I was thinking it might be that."

"Are you mad? That I chose to use your name?"

Hiding any shadow of his usual expression, Yuichi's tone was persistently calm. Mai and her attachment to his ring, he got her to let down by promising to donate his favorite wristwatch and fountain pen from when he was in high school. She still had looked reluctant to accept his involvement with Karin. Maybe because of that, after they had been talking, he was asking randomly about Karin, and even Wataru had a picture of her on him.

But that might have been only natural. It had been more than a year prior that Yuichi and Karin had been rumored to be together. Despite that, given the fact

to this day no one had ever witnessed them out on a date, it must have been a sudden awakening for Mai... especially with the "information network" on Yuichi she was so proud of.

"If that's what it means, then I'm glad I'm a guy. Even if I'm walking around with you, it doesn't appear right off to be a date. No one would think that the Yuichi Kazuki would have a male lover."

"...Wataru."

Yuichi lightly reprimanded the words spoken half out of despair with his gaze. However, Wataru was in an unbearable mood, even if he was making fun. He had been thinking a lot about Karin and Yuichi since yesterday, but no matter what the complicated feelings would not go away. Even if it was his little sister who understood the situation, the fact that the world would see that some other person was Yuichi's lover was both sad and mortifying.

"I really don't like this petty way of doing things either."

Yuichi took a sip of the completely cooled green tea, and opened his mouth again.

"But honestly, I also thought this might be a good opportunity. The way things are now, we'll always have to deal with troublesome feelings. Just how long do we have to put up with it? Until the trendy girls get tired of me? How much longer will that take?"

"Kazuki... "

The "information network" Mai talked about was probably something Yuichi very much could not make up his mind about. Even his eyes that usually had

some quality of composure about them now looked as if brooding.

"This will probably cause trouble for Karin and there's no guarantee that everything will go well. But I've had enough of all this. I don't want to make that heartbreaking face."

"My face...?"

"You're trying to protect me, aren't you?"

Sadly arresting Wataru with his gaze, Yui's voice was shaking.

"It's always like that. Every time it looks like someone's going to find out, you try to cover for me. You force yourself to smile, and even make yourself do things you don't want to. I'm not going out with you because I want you to feel that way. I don't want to worry you even an ounce of worry."

"So...you'll use Karin as a beard...?"

"I guess we can't ask anyone but people who know our situation for things like this. I do think it's an unreasonable thing to ask for. So, a few months ago, I should do it. Once everyone clearly recognizes that I have a girlfriend, their interest should shift to someone else. I don't suppose it should take very long."

Watching Yuichi talk on and on, Wataru no longer knew how he should respond. For him to smile so much when he hated putting burdens on other people was more than anything, it was not easy to believe. It seemed to mean that he was that far driven into a corner, and his irritation was quite deep.

The biggest cause for that...is me...

Unable to bear it, Wataru gently knelt

next to Yuichi. The fatigue that arose on his face was heartbreaking, but it didn't cause his charm to fade even a little. Enduring the impulse to embrace him, Wataru made up his mind and said a few emboldened words.

"Let's try talking to Karin."

"Eh..."

Yuichi opened his eyes as if taken aback, and without blinking gazed back.

"By 'talking', you mean..."

"If we explain it and ask her properly, I'm pretty sure she'll understand. For now, if we get her to spend time with you at Ryokuyo Fest, it should convince Tachibana and the others. She seems to be the most passionate of your fans, so if she gives up the other girls should naturally tone it down."

"Wataru..."

"I'll bet she'll want plenty of collateral for this. But don't worry. I think Karin will do it. Even she seems to admire you. Besides, it's weird to say this about my own little sister...but she's a good guy."

It was strange, but the moment Wataru resolved that, doubt rose to the surface in Yuichi's expression. Up until now, the two of them alone had resolved their own problems, but this time that would not work. Maybe he was thinking once again about the responsibility of involving other people.

"It's all right. I'm sure it'll work out."

Wataru took Yuichi's left hand and lightly kissed his ring.

Regardless of who was next to him, as long as this finger knew the truth it was all right, thought

Wataru.

Blessed with two days of fine weather, Ry Fest finally began.

The auction that Wataru's class B planned heavy publicity to draw in quite a few people, and first day alone they gathered proceeds near ¥10. The most popular item was the favorite cell phone of Miho Ookusa, the most beautiful girl in school, had been prepared as the day's highlight. A real four-leaf clover was enclosed in an acrylic heart shape, and set with an M, the initial of her first name. Of course high bidders were mainly boys who admired her, and loud bidding war broke out amongst them.

"I'm telling you...yesterday sure was a one for Miho!"

"Yeah, you said it. At any rate, ¥500 jumped to ¥7000 in the end."

"And now of course there's the 'Womens' Event' - Yuichi Kazuki." Talk about popular."

Kawamura shared his impressions from the day before while buying and eating takoyaki from a stand. The auction was going to start at one o'clock so that meant he had to eat quickly and devote his time to getting ready. In essence, no matter how long the auction itself took, setup only took a little over an hour. But, as Kawamura had the role of making sure everyone came together, he had to be there constantly both before and after. As Wataru had nothing pressing to do, he had wandered around the school since morning with friends.

"Is it my imagination...or are there more people here than yesterday? Even if it is Sunday..."

"Yeah, the girls from other schools stick out. And, it's almost all girls."

"I know, right? Lots of cuties, and it's makin' me more tense."

When he felt led by Kawamura's impression to take another look around, there certainly was an overwhelming number of girls dressed smartly and with great enthusiasm. They were standing and talking at the entrance to the cafe, making a fuss over the barker for the haunted house, and adding more color to an atmosphere bustling even under normal circumstances.

"They're probably...fans of Kazuki."

Maybe out of consideration for Wataru's mindset, Kawamura muttered in a somewhat soft voice. But if he reacted to each and every such thing, no level of presence of mind would be able to stand it. In the first place, Wataru was enveloped by a bigger worry, so it didn't really bother him how many more girls with Yuichi in their sights showed up.

The generally open school building was starting to fill up with guests. The students were eager with the sense of a smashing success, and everyone's faces became increasingly animated. Announcements were being broadcast inside every ten minutes with information on something, and pop music playing during the intervals lightly stirred the place up. Flashy handwritten signs; exhibition classrooms decorated with paper flowers and posters; the scent of food drifting in from stands. Even amongst it the smell of curry was strong, and Kawamura, who had eaten his takoyaki quickly, made to head in that direction.

11:30...I'm sure Karin said she'd meet me at noon...

Suddenly dropping his gaze to his feet, Wataru sighed unconsciously. He had hoped that by looking around he would be distracted, but surely his heart would not be lifted that easily.

"Hey, Wataru. Uh...regarding Kazuki, is he coming again?"

"No need to worry, he'll be here in time. He might be soon now."

"Okay... Then, Karin, too..."

"...Yeah. They're going to meet at the gate, and come in together. She was still coming this morning. She thought if she went to the festival with Kazuki, she'd end up hated by people."

He meant to reply as cheerfully as possible, but maybe things hadn't worked out well. Karin had brought a plate of curry, and encouragingly helped him, saying "Here, have some."

"I'm not after a boyfriend these days so don't mind, but..."

Wataru had entreated her into consenting to go. Karin shrugged in resignation.

"I really want to make Ryokuyo Festival time I actually hang out with Kazuki. I mean, you know, I've forgotten, Wataru, but a friend of mine got mad at me down by him. Given that, even if it is just an act, I want to exactly go on pretending to be his girlfriend."

"Oh...the girl with the present..."

"Right, right. Well, she seems to have had a crush on him."

boyfriend now, so I think it should be okay."

Sitting on the bed, Karin hugged a cushion with a complicated expression on her face. Yuichi had said that he wanted to talk to her directly too, but after being shocked by being seen in her pajamas she would not come out of her room however much they called her, so at last he gave up and went home.

"But listen, are you really sure about this, Wataru?"

"Wh-What..."

"If Kazuki and I are officially recognized, the one it'll hurt the most isn't one of his fans. It's you."

"....."

Hit where it hurt, Wataru unthinkingly fell silent. Before he talked with Yuichi he had played out the situation dozens of times in his head. Even so, he had found no other way and resigned himself to this, so he did not want to hear things that would dull his resolution.

Maybe that thought reached her, as Karin smiled ruefully and tossed the cushion away.

"Right, I gotcha."

"Karin..."

"The cute little sister will pitch in and help with her brother's illicit love affair."

"Uh, thanks?"

His stress relieved for the time being, Wataru thumped Karin on the head. But when it came down to real intentions, she did not seem to be wholly against a monopoly on the highly-rumored "prince" for a day. After she showed her face with Yuichi at the auction on

the day in-question, she'd have him treat her to food from the snack bars, she said with a smile.

"Man, are there lots of people here."

Once he took one step out of the entrance, Kawamura opened his eyes wide as if in admiration. They had walked around the school once and decided to take a look outside to stretch their legs, but rented chairs and tents, and banners and such dotted the campus and there, and every establishment was in a bustling, crowded state.

"Umm, right now in the auditorium show the prelims for the mimicry contest. Then, in the afternoon on the grounds is a cheerleader promotion... Oh, and Miho shows up in the movie club's new production."

"Forget that, I bet you can't get past the yearbook stand over there."

"Heh! Could you tell? Think I'll go buy some water."

Wataru was amazed at how energetic Kawamura was as he ran off with pamphlets in one hand. Miho was coming in the afternoon, so he probably could help but be full of vigor. In the evening of the same day would begin the night festival, and it would be an ideal situation for sweethearts. For Kawamura, who of now had not made any progress with her, it was a decisive point.

"Night festival...huh."

Once clean-up was finished, participating students were voluntary, so Wataru planned to immediately go home. He knew from the start that he could not spend time with Yuichi, and in that case staying behind would be meaningless. He did consider messing around

friends, but it didn't seem like he would feel like it today.
"Hey, hey, Wataru. Don't the girls coming from that way look awfully fidgety?"

"Fidgety?"

Kawamura had come back promptly, and while carrying the yakisoba, pointed in the direction of the stairs leading down to the grounds. The gymnasium and clubrooms of the independent athletic clubs were located there, but the number of carts should have been noticeably diminishing.

"See, they keep turning back the way they came. There's even some who're intentionally changing course."

"It's true. Maybe they're doing some kind of outdoor event."

"Nothin's written on the pamphlet about it, though."

After saying that much about it, the two suddenly fell silent.

Girls turned to look again and again with vaguely excited looks on their faces. That recognizable reaction might be to see if Yuichi had arrived, thought Wataru.

"Want to go take a look?"

Maybe he guessed Wataru's feelings, as Kawamura extended the invite. If Yuichi was there, of course Karin would probably be next to him. He was not inclined to see them acting like boyfriend and girlfriend, but after all it was only the difference between sooner and later. Wataru nodded, and started walking in the direction where the crowd's glances were focusing.

"Still though, isn't it bizarre how worked up?"

"Yeah... Even for Kazuki, this is..."

As Kawamura pointed out, women were blushing, peering absorbedly at their cell screens probably after taking pictures, and one was stealthily whispering into each others' ear emitting squeals of joy. Carefully observing them they could tell that the place in-question seemed spot with parasols set up near a juice stand.

That's where...Kazuki...

The instant he thought he might be the heart made a loud thump. That place did not just have juice, but several simple white tables and chairs had been prepared and it had been contrived so that they could enjoy the mood of an instant café...but one table seemed to be showered in attention.

Wataru and Kawamura, both a little nervous, walked towards the center of where the distant crowd was concentrated. But who was waiting for them? resolutely approaching Wataru was someone a little totally other than he imagined.

"Ryokuyo Fest is a success as usual, but you're working hard?"

"Hello, Wataru."

"Shohei...and even Asaka..."

What are they doing in a place like this? That was what Wataru first thought about this misplacement in the unusual setting of a high school culture festival.

Today, Shohei was not dressed in a suit but in a rather a relaxed day-off style. His outfit of a suede

with turned-up collar worn over thin wool pants gave the impression that even a casual atmosphere was considered in his stylish dress. On the other hand, Masanobu, in his usual way, wore an autumn-esque ensemble of an overseas brand jacket oozing high quality, and corduroy pants. They both wore loafers without socks, and even that relaxed state was cool.

"Oh, so it was you guys..."

In their case, it was not strange for them to have the gazes of women poured on them like Yuichi. In fact, while they were talking like this Wataru sensed looks from every direction. Also, even though they stood out plenty just being together, they were drinking Ramune of all things in a manner innocent for them.

"...Hey, Wataru."

When he realized it was not Yuichi, all of a sudden he felt let-down. On the contrary, Kawamura suddenly asked quietly in an uncomfortable voice:

"Shohei's Kazuki's big brother, right? I hear his name a lot in the Renovation Club, but this is the first time I've actually met him. He's as stylish as I'd expect his brother to be, but he sure is awfully intense."

"He's a graduate from here, and it seems he was student council president."

"Really? Then the contents sure don't match the label."

"What, is there some secret?"

Making the marble in his bottle clatter around, Shohei aimed eyes that seemed to be searching in this direction. Even in a place where students were playing at running businesses, only the place where he sat

did look classy. Perhaps because Masanobu possessed disarmingly good looks, when they together each of their charms seemed even stronger.

"Shohei, have you come to see K's auction?"

"More or less. I'm a little interested to see the kind of innocence he feigns in front of everyone."

"Feign innocence..."

"By the way, Shohei's the one who let me come along. Takako wanted to come too, but she had a lesson. She half cried since she wouldn't get to see Wataru."

Shohei listened to Masanobu, and seemingly intentionally sighed, saying, "I wouldn't let my daughter to this." Because he seemed a lot younger than his real age, and because of his appearance betrayed a fragment of his lifestyle, no one would have believed he was the father of a child in first grade.

"Speaking of which, where's Yuichi? According to the place where we got our pamphlets, it's going to start in less than an hour. Or else is the lead going to his entrance at the end?"

"....."

"Don't tell me the one who made the deal isn't showing up?"

Wataru could not entirely tell how much he was pretending not to know. However, as depressed as he was, an abrupt anger grew hot within his heart. He could not endure even his feelings over Yuichi's consideration being rolled around in someone's palm like a game. Yuichi, Shohei was probably a valuable older brother.

but to Wataru he was an adult with a nasty personality. It was true that he couldn't despise him from the depths of his heart, but naturally he was unamused at being toyed with.

"Kazuki still hasn't arrived. He decided to spend the day with my little sister, so he should show up with her. I don't think he and I will talk much to each other today, even if we're in the same place all day."

"Wataru...is that true?"

Once he declared that defiantly, surprisingly it was not Shohei but Masanobu whose face changed color and drew closer. Wataru of course did not know that he had been given a similar prediction of events from Shohei beforehand.

"It's true. But hadn't Shohei already guessed that much?"

"Me? Well...maybe, maybe not."

"I wonder what effect it will have that you stirred Kazuki up and got him to participate. A person like you doesn't seem like he would do anything without thinking ahead. But, I don't really know what your aim is. Of course, I don't like someone else sticking close to Kazuki, but we're not going to get into a fight over just that..."

When he said that much, Masanobu stiffened his expression, as if taken aback. After showing a slight hesitation, he opened his mouth as if in resolve:

"Wataru, are you...suspicious of me?"

"Wha...?"

"Of trying to take advantage of you two not being together or something..."

"I, I think nothing of the sort!"

Wataru denied it in great exasperation, but at that moment Shohei heard him being led, it was true he had taken the bait. That did not mean he was suspicious of Masanobu, though, and in actuality he hardly thought about today's particulars.

Now, what should he do? He had provoked and wounded him. Looking at the impatient Wataru, Masanobu seemed to be in a quandary. Wataru wanted to make sure of Shohei's true motive here, but now that was out of the question.

"Let's see, you there. You're Wataru's friend, right?"

"Y...Yes. Nice to meet you, my name is Kawamura."

"Okay. Listen, would you mind showing me the way to where the auction will be?"

"Y-You want me to?!"

Suddenly addressed by Shohei, Kawamura lost all presence of mind. But Shohei did not mind it whatsoever as he stood up, and grinning said, "Please."

"It looks like it'd be best to let those two talk for a bit."

"Shohei, I..."

Quieting Masanobu with a glance, Shohei again shifted his view to Wataru.

"Wataru. That's quite the angle of attack."

"Eh?"

"I knew full-well that Yuichi would have no choice but to be around a girl. No matter how calm

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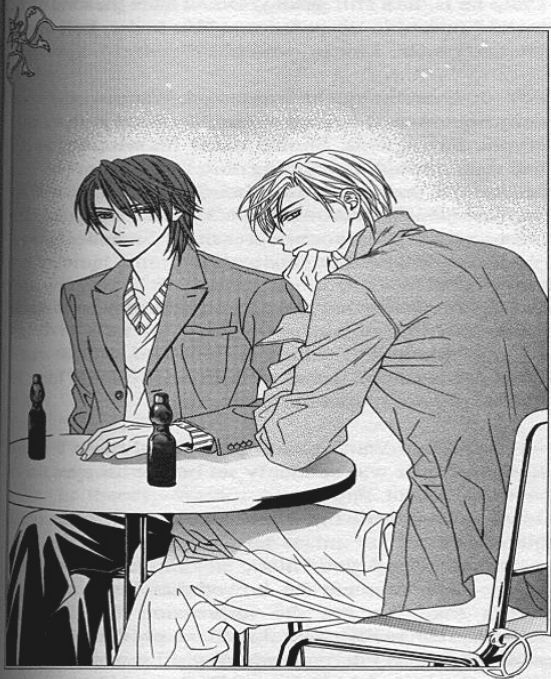
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sharp he is, he's still young, too. That's the kind a child makes in desperation. You know, he'll re-intensely later. I mean, won't he?"

"....."

Even though he was asked, Wataru could deny nor agree. Looking at him like he was enjoying cryptic movements, Shohei made his assertion a had seen through everything.

"If you two go on being together, it will increase your burden, Wataru. Even today, you have put up with hiding your depression. I wonder how Yuichi can deal with that situation."

"W-Well..."

"I'm sure that loving you will make it that harder on him."

"Shohei!"

Masanobu rebuked him in a sharp tone. Shohei did not retract his smile.

When Wataru sank powerlessly into a cold Ramune bottle was suddenly set before his eyes.

"Asaka..."

"It's a little out-of-season, but it's good since it's quite cold."

"...Thank you."

The moment he bowed his head merely for form's sake, he got the impression that Masanobu smiled. He really was skilled at producing a good atmosphere. While remembering all the various things that had happened until now, Wataru slowly raised his head and Masanobu came into his field of view.

"It's a pretty weird feeling."

Just when Wataru thought he should say something, Masanobu spoke up as if taking the initiative.

"It wasn't long ago that I confessed to you. Today, we're able to see each other as friends again."

"Ah...um..."

"I'm glad you didn't have to avoid me."

Apparently relieved from the heart, Masanobu's smile became all the softer. But in truth, Wataru did not know how to face him, so he was all the more grateful for this abrupt reunion. He could not deny the possibility that it was part of Shohei's scheme, but if Masanobu had at least not consented to it, he had no ill feelings towards him. Even after the "Are you suspicious of me?" earlier, Wataru thought he could trust him.

"What Shohei said before...it's best not to dwell on it."

"....."

"When he says it, it sounds strangely true, but it's just a sophism."

In theory, Wataru knew that too. However, Yuichi seemed to really be hurting when he came by his house late that night, so after seeing his face filled with those kinds of feelings he could not bring himself to say anything to the contrary.

"Uh..."

Maybe Masanobu would offer some optimistic opinion. Thinking this, Wataru started to speak, banking on that ray of hope. But, he quickly rebuked himself for it. Now that he knew how Masanobu felt, there was no

way he could consult with him over Yuichi like I done previously.

This conflict of Wataru's seemed to be through easily by Masanobu. With his ever-smile, and without any fight in his voice, he wouldn't mind."

"Because I'd be much happier than if we talk about anything because of some odd restraint."

"That's not it. You're well-informed, and are plenty of other things..."

"But, don't you sense me the strongest w comes to links to Yuichi?"

"Well..."

Showing that he was indeed an adult, Mas knew his own value well. Perhaps this part of hi on Yuichi's nerves. His wisdom that let him a anything without mistaking where he stood nat led him to a position superior to others. The s of Wataru's refusal by Masanobu's previous conf aside, the less he acted in a calculated manner, the frequently he was difficult to deal with directly.

"But, I really am all right. Thanks, Asaka."

Wataru somehow said only that, and vigor gulped the Ramune. All at once, sharp bubbles f inside his mouth, and he felt a tingling sensation do the nape of his neck. Wataru breathed out deeply and in a somewhat refreshed mood muttered "All internally. Then, he opened his mouth again.

"I've made a promise to Kazuki."

"Promise...?"

"I won't lie. I won't take everything

myself. He tells me that every time something happens, and for all that he carries plenty of things on his back, too... He's a show-off and stubborn, and he doesn't even show me his true colors very much, but if he's that contrary, I think that I alone at least have to be honest. If we collide so much, I'd better jolt him."

When he put it together into words, a sense that it was really true came into being. The ripple that Shohei caused would most likely develop into a big problem in the future. So, Wataru really could not be lighthearted enough to say things were fine. But, the only partner he could share that anxiety with was Yuichi.

"So, I think it would be good if you and I could have a different kind of relationship than we've had until now.

"Wataru... "

"Not just you helping me, but more...in a shape that you and I can only build together. Though if you were to ask me what that is, I still don't really know..."

Masanobu was speechless. His face said that he had not even imagined that Wataru would be able to communicate his feelings clearly to this extent. His out-of-bounds confession had been sealed in the same way by an irrefutable response.

"I tell ya...you..."

"Eh?"

The silence continued for a bit, and before long Masanobu with a sigh looked back with eyes of wonder.

"Why is it you get stronger when things get tough? You got me."

"Wha? Uh, did I say something strange?"

"Not at all. I just...got into a bit of a sulky mood."
"Huh?"

Hearing that line spoken with laughter, Wataru didn't really grasp the meaning. Despite that, he was feeling that the tension that had been floating between him and Masanobu had dissolved just a little, and he gradually became happy.

"Oops, my cell..."

When he tried to turn down the rest of his Ramen to hide his embarrassment, suddenly Wataru's cell started ringing. As he took it out he wondered if it was an SOS from a Kawamura dumbfounded by Shohe. Surprisingly it was Yuichi's name that was flashing on the screen.

"Pardon me, Asaka. I'll be right back."

He quickly walked away from the table to answer the phone, and in the blink of an eye he asked "Wataru?" He could sense that the tone was different than usual, and without knowing it he put more emphasis into his own voice.

"Kazuki, did something happen? It's not the time before the auction."

"Is your sister already here?"

"No...not yet..."

"Any contact? No emails or anything?"

"Nope. But, isn't she meeting you at the station today?"

"She hasn't come."

That's impossible, he thought reflexively. Wataru left the house, Karin was in the middle of getting dressed. Provided there was no accident or serious illness or anything, it didn't seem like she'd stand

up at the last minute. Not to mention how unthinkable it was for her not to contact either of them.

"That's odd... Karin was complaining about something or other but she seemed to enjoy..."

He started speaking, and the words suddenly stopped. He had remembered that morning when Karin jokingly said "Won't somebody hate me for this?" No way, he promptly tried to deny, but once he was anxious about it, it felt like he couldn't get away from it.

"Kazuki, I'll see if I can find her. The auction's a bust if you don't show up, so could you go ahead and head that way? We're using our B class classroom."

"Got it."

Yuichi must have picked up on Wataru's alarm, as he hung up without wasting time chatting. Seeing his suddenly rigid face, Masanobu asked "What happened?" in a worried voice.

"Sorry, Wataru. I overheard some of your conversation, but isn't Karin your little sister? Wasn't she together with Kazuki today?"

"Uh...well, she seems to be late for some reason..."

"If you're going to search, I'll help you."

Masanobu was already starting to stand up, and Wataru said "That's all right" as he earnestly tried to smooth it over with a smile. He appreciated the thought, but Masanobu did not know Karin's face, and since he had come this far he wanted him to enjoy himself and then go home.

Yes, it must be a false alarm. This was simply needless anxiety.

That was what he told himself, and then he considered calling his house. He had just realized how high Yuichi's popularity went, so maybe his parents were oversensitive. Wataru somehow reorganized his feelings, and tried checking with his parents, this time their day off. But sure enough, she had set out some time ago, and his mother said nothing seemed out of place about her.

Then, it wouldn't be strange for her to appear at the school gate. For them to pass each other at such an obvious meeting place...no chance...

Had something happened to her end? Wataru tried thinking of every possibility, but none of them struck home. If it were an accident their parents would have been contacted, and if sudden illness should have at least called home.

But in that case...

Just where had Karin disappeared to...?

"So you see, there's a lot of girls here today throwing their eyes on Kazuki. If you were to stick close to him at a time like that, it'd probably ruin the auction in one swoop. Kazuki's donation is the biggest prize, so even though everyone would pay attention to it, they'd be brought down."

"Then wouldn't it have been best to tell him that in the first place? Didn't he himself tell you he was bringing his girlfriend to Ryokuyo Fest?"

"....."

"Besides, I heard this from my brother. Even if Kazuki has a girlfriend, people fuss over him like

a celebrity, so no one would care. It wouldn't have any effect on the auction, would it?"

When Karin answered back without hesitation, the female student with the sharp expression who had drawn near fell into an apparently vexed silence. She was quite cute, but nothing but poisonous self-centered rationale escaped her thinly colored lips. Having silenced someone like that, Karin felt somewhat pleased.

However...she would regret enjoying making her angry. In any case, there were three of these girls, and if it came down to a use of force she probably would not be able to resist them.

Oh, man. I wonder if anyone's going to come help me...

While holding on to a futile wish, at a loss she looked up at the ceiling. Karin had arrived before the time she was supposed to meet Yuichi, and being told "Your brother's calling for you" by a female student claiming to be Wataru's classmate, she wound up completely shut away in a room not being used for Ryokuyo Fest. When she thought that these days even a grade-schooler probably wouldn't be fooled by such a trick, she felt thoroughly bitter over her gullibility.

I never thought the day would come when I'd get tangled up in some love affair!

She was surprised that what she had said to Wataru as a joke would possibly come true. The silver lining to this cloud was that these three did not especially seem to be true delinquents. They were all cute in their own right, and seemed to care about how they looked. It also came across that they were surprised as how

unyielding Karin was, and unsure as to how to handle her. Since she was Yuichi's girlfriend, maybe they had imagined on their own that she was the reserved type who would make him think she needed his protection.

Too bad for you, then. I won't lose Wataru when it comes to boldness!

That was certainly true, and although the two siblings both gave an impression of harmlessness at a glance, inside they were quite determined and straightforward. Even her brother himself complained every time they had a quarrel that he could never beat her.

"So, how much longer do I have to be her brother?"

Karin had had enough of this, and she decided to act carelessly. She thought Yuichi might worry about her not showing up and finally find her, but the room she had been led to was a bit distanced from the party, and the school with festivities, and the surroundings were so different and silent as another world.

"If you let me go now, I'll keep it quiet for you, Kazuki. So, come on..."

"What's that supposed to mean? Aren't you just getting a little full of yourself?"

"Full of myself..."

"You're plenty blessed just to be going out with him. You probably have no clue how all the girls who were turned down by him feel!"

The one complained, and the other two chimed in with their agreement. Even after hearing that, it was still obviously a put-on...not to mention that Karin was not Yuichi's real lover.

"Say something!"

Even if she told the truth, it would only cause a bigger disturbance. But then, that would only be if they believed her.

Well, I have no plans to say it. There's no way they'd believe me anyway.

Karin heaved an extra-large sigh. The time of her release seemed so far-off.

"Sure enough, she hasn't come yet..."

Going over the crowd of people inside the school, Wataru continued to search for Karin. He tried calling Kawamura's cell, but it went without saying that she had not arrived, and neither had Yuichi. His part of the auction was not until the end, so there was still breathing room, but over the phone Kawamura too was in an uneasy state. Behind him Wataru could hear some guy that sounded like Shohei taking command of something.

"Yeah, when I got him here he started complaining about how people would never get into such an unsophisticated design. He pointed stuff out and then started using our classmates to change the layout."

"Okay...and then, Masanobu got a call earlier."

"Yeah. Now he's at his beck and call. Those two are amazing, though. It's like...the inside of the classroom looks so much better I don't recognize it. All the girls are stupefied, and all the guys have some kind of look of respect in their eyes. Hurry up and get here, Wataru. I'm sure you'll be surprised to see it."

Because he did not hear that Karin was unaccounted for, Kawamura ended the call cheerfully.

There were twenty minutes left until the start of the auction. It was about time for the announcement to begin gathering for it.

"So weird...maybe she really hasn't made it to the school yet..."

His impatience naturally starting to rise, Wataru looked around in annoyance. There were lots of people from other schools here today, and they looked much the same in their street clothes. Trying to pick out distinctive features in order to find Karin with her shoulder-length black hair and features just like his seemed impossible.

"And then, what's up with Kazuki not being there either...?"

Wataru suddenly thought about contacting Kazuki again, but at this point every minute was crucial. If Kazuki had found Karin, there was no way Wataru wouldn't get in touch.

"Karin...where have you gone...?"

Muttering that in his mouth over and over, Wataru ran off trying to seek other places.

Of course, even I was honestly surprised that...

Karin remembered when she first found out that Wataru embraced feelings of love for Yuichi.

She had smiled cheerfully and refused to discuss even a small hint of conflict. But that was because she loved Wataru so much. When he talked about Yuichi, he always seemed to be hurting somehow. Even if he spoke of him or copped an attitude like he did not like him, his eyes always betrayed his speech and conduct.

So while thinking maybe, maybe, Karin secretly got her heart ready. Even if they felt the same way for each other, they would probably have to keep their relationship secret. That might be for several years, or maybe their whole lives. In that case, she would be their ally. That's what she determined in her heart from the start.

"Isn't it about time for the auction to start?"

The girl with the shortest hair spoke loudly as she looked at the wall clock.

"Mai, what do we do? If this girl doesn't show up, won't Kazuki just go home?"

"Don't worry about that. Earlier, Tomomi caught Kazuki at the school gate and told him that she wasn't feeling well and suddenly went home. See, I got an email saying she pulled it off."

The girl named Mai pulled her cell out of her skirt pocket. The other two peered from either side, and exchanging relieved glances they shared a fainthearted laugh. This was probably because they had no confidence whatsoever that the situation was under control.

"If this girl had just gone back home in the first place, there wouldn't be any problem."

"In any case, we cannot let her go to the auction. Kazuki has to be there alone."

"But, we can't all stay here the whole time..."

Hopeless, sighed Karin.

They really were trying to separate her from Yuichi. There was no mistake that they'd use force if she tried to run for it. There was also no way to win against

superior numbers, and at this point maybe surrender and saying "I'm going home" was advisable.

But that's a cop-out, too. Besides, if I go and go home now, I doubt it'll do them any good.

Even Karin understood. It wasn't like she understood these girls' feelings at all. Regardless of what she thought of these reckless actions, jealousy itself was a very natural feeling.

When she thought about how she was really Yuichi's girlfriend or anything, in a way the three might have become those with whom she sympathized the most.

"Fine. For now, we'll just have her stay here a little while."

Mai spoke resolutely, as if to cut off the conversation that was going nowhere. At that moment Karin finally realized that this was no time for sympathizing with these three. If she had any doubts about what "have her stay here" meant, suddenly she noticed something shining in Mai's hand.

Th-They wouldn't...!

Karin went pale in an instant.

"Mai...are you serious?"

"I mean, I went to the trouble of getting in with someone on student council so I could borrow it. Let's use it."

"....."

This is not funny, Karin shouted in her head. They plan to lock me up in here.

Wataru was hurrying towards the stairs.

council office where he and Yuichi used to have their secret meetings.

Another call had arrived from Kawamura, and he told him that Mai and her two friends still had not returned to the room. Announcements about the start of the auction had already gone out several times, and participants were starting to gather one after the other. Despite this, he thought it odd that a member of the executive committee was not there.

"I mean, isn't it weird? She made such a big deal over Kazuki donating, so why would she not show up for the actual thing? Well...Kazuki's not here yet either, so even if she did come she might not be able to see him."

Kawamura had happened to be present when Mai tried to coax Yuichi into donating his ring. From how persistently she had asked him about Karin, and how she really did look like she still had a thing for Yuichi, it made Wataru suspicious of whether it had some connection with Karin's lateness.

"I hear that Tachibana knew that last semester's vice-president was interested in her, so lately she's been in the student council office a lot. Y'know, you were always in and out of that room when Kazuki was here."

"Then, that means Tachibana has a key to it, too?"

"I don't know that much, but isn't that place perfect for not being seen by people?"

Wataru thought instinctually, "She's there." The next instant, before Kawamura was done talking, he took off running like a shot. If Mai and Karin disappeared at the same time, the only imaginable line connecting them

was Yuichi.

The student council office... It's not a place... Damn it! That was a blind spot...

It was quiet, and few people came and went. He had once taken a liking to it and spent many a time with Yuichi, and yet at the essential time it didn't cross his mind. If his opponent was Mai then it was not likely to come down to violence, but willful defiance did not seem likely to sit quietly. More than anything, though, she was not the one who deserved Mai's respect. He was.

Sorry, Karin. I guess we shouldn't have let you to be a fake girlfriend...

It didn't matter how much he regretted it now the priority was getting in there. As he ran up the stairs and down the hallway, Wataru could feel the tumult of Ryokuyo Fest was gradually getting further away.

Then:

"Come on, cut this out! This is unbelievable!"

A familiar voice suddenly came to his ears. When he regained his composure and looked at the sight of the student council office door being forced closed by three female students leapt into his vision, Karin's voice was coming from the room, and it was very clear that she was being locked inside.

"You should know that this is illegal! You hear?"

"Shut up!"

Karin was shaking the door so much that it was having quite the hard time getting it closed. When she breathed out in relief as if she was finally succes

she said back through the doorway in a rough voice:

"Just deal with it for two hours!"

"Why should I have to deal with it?!"

"It's not much when you think about us, is it?!"

Wataru had been about to take off running, but he stopped unconsciously with a jerk. Until now, he had never once heard Mai's voice sound so bitter. There was no trace of the mushy feigned voice that Wataru thought he had a weakness to, and her words were trembling, as if she might start crying at any time.

"You should know! It wasn't just us who longed for Kazuki! There were lots of girls long before you who thought dearly, dearly of him. Do you know how much those girls looked forward to seeing him today? Can you imagine how much of a shock it would be for a girlfriend to suddenly show up? You might think it's stupid, and even I think I'm an idiot for it, but there's nothing I can do about that!"

The key fell to the floor with a clink. But Mai did not seem to notice. Not caring that tears were streaming down her face, she shouted in an even louder voice:

"I was in love with Kazuki! I wanted him for so long, and even though no matter how many times he was confessed to he wouldn't say yes, even then I couldn't stop loving him!"

"Mai, stop..."

"Stop crying, Mai..."

Her friends who at first were surprised by her threatening attitude at some point also had adopted tearful voices. Before long, as if the thread of tension

being stretched had snapped, the three huddled at the door and started sobbing.

Tachibana...

Wataru was half dumbfounded as he gazed at the spectacle. Even though he thought he had to get out immediately, his feet practically would not move. Unexpectedly coming to know this intense side of her, his heart ached at her feelings of acting like a poor girl and trying to get even a little closer to Yuichi. All of this, Yuichi probably would never even want her again, but she was so jealous that she lost sight of everything.

Karin probably felt the same way he did. Making a huge racket, they were now completely done. This was probably quite the nuisance for her to be wrapped up in, but maybe she had lost the willpower to complain.

But I have to go. I have to hurry and help Karin and then calm down Tachibana and the others...

Wataru systematically decided in his head the order in which he should do things, and then this time he started to walk forward.

Someone's left hand came to rest gently on his right shoulder.

Wataru unconsciously dropped his gaze. Just before his eyes he discovered a silver ring shining.

"Kazuki..."

Wataru was about to ask about the author when Yuichi smiled at him and started walking forward quietly. Once he neared the door, one of the three finally noticed him.

"K-Kazuki..."

At that word Mai and the other one looked up, and in an instant stiffened. With a beautiful bearing Yuichi reached down to the floor, and silently picked up the dropped key.

"Tachibana."

"Y...Yes...?"

"Open it."

His gentle, clear tone was far more dreadful than an angry one. Mai took the key with a trembling hand, and without saying anything turned to face the door. Beyond the completely opened door stood a perplexed Karin. Wataru, who was watching, sighed very deeply, relieved from the core at the sight of his unharmed sister.

"If this was going to happen, I should have told the truth from the beginning."

Yuichi slowly put distance between himself and the girls, cast a glimpse in Wataru's direction, and then opened his mouth again. Fearing what "the truth" might mean, Wataru suppressed his quickening pulse and watched the scene attentively.

"My lover is not Fujii's sister."

"Wha..."

When they heard the unexpected confession, the three opened their tear-filled eyes wide.

"N-Not Fujii's sister... But, the other day you..."

"I'm sorry for lying. But even I have things I don't want found out. So, I got Fujii to help me, and borrowed his sister as a temporary girlfriend."

"No..."

Turning unfeeling eyes on a stunned Mai answered quietly after a short silence.

"It's someone people would find difficult to accept."

"Difficult to accept..."

"Yeah. But, that person is the only one in my eyes. Even if no one understands, as long as that person is there I can go on living. That's how strong my feelings are. To me it's someone dear, important, and irreplaceable."

"....."

"I regard what you did with contempt, but the original cause of all this was my lie. I have no right to blame you. So, let's both forget what happened...Tachibana."

"Yes...?"

"I'll say it forever. No matter how much I feel for me, I can't return it."

They were plain and emboldened words.

Words without a shred of doubt, cruel and beautiful words of rejection.

Trying to stop his body from shaking, Wataru suddenly realized that Karin was looking his way.

Karin...

Good for you, Wataru was what her eyes were saying.

They were secretly aware that, at least in her lifetime, she would like to be confessed to so passionately as well.

As a matter of fact...

Karin was very proud that "that person" was her own brother.

"¥1200!"

"Yes, we have a bid there for ¥1200! Well? Aren't there any others? Not to put too fine a point on it, but this instant camera is practically brand new and its retail value is ¥10,000!"

"¥1250!"

"That's not much of a jump, but ¥1250. Are you sure? It's last year's limited release color."

"Okay, ¥1300!"

"...How about it? Are you sure? All right then, this item goes to the girl in glasses there for ¥1300. Congratulations!"

Kawamura hit the rostrum with the toy hammer in his right hand, and a carefree plinging sound blended with applause. The girl who had quickly become his assistant in Mai's absence handed the small donated instant camera to the girl with the high bid with a smile.

"What a tranquil scene."

While stifling a yawn at the very back of the room, Shohei muttered in a bored fashion. He had heard that Yuichi's item was to be the very last, so he checked how many more he would have to wait through on a copy of the item list, and surprisingly the one after the next was already the last. He thought the spectators should be increasing, and when he let his gaze travel around the surroundings again he saw that the forty chairs prepared in the room were not nearly enough, as the window facing the hallway was filled with a surprising number of people peering in from outside.

"By sex ratio, it's probably 30/70. Kazuki sure is popular with the girls."

"Of course. He's my brother."

"But, I've been looking around for him. Wataru isn't here either. Isn't that a little odd?"

Sitting next to him, Masanobu softly whistled, turning his concern into Shohei's ear. The place was crowded not just with students but also lots of adults such as parents and siblings, but even amongst them they were the type that stood out, and there was a mood such that watching only had to come near to feel like blushing.

"It definitely is a little odd. Yuichi is supposed to be a guest, but that doesn't mean they prepared a welcome room, and we should have known if he'd come."

Led to the area by Kawamura before the auction began, Shohei looked around with a troubled visage. The room he had hastily helped set up. It couldn't be that the auction was sponsored by students, but what he would put up with what was indeed the simplicity of a school culture festival, he somehow managed to turn the layout up to his own level of taste. He had had the desks put in order, the rostrum covered with a cloth and placed it front and center, and a mount prepared so that the donations would be displayed even higher. A dark curtain was stretched over the window, the effect of the illumination as changed to make the items stand out better, and the chairs were lined up like in a movie theater. These things alone should have been enough to greatly change anyone's first impression.

But there was no mistake that without Yuichi, the leading man of the day, the artistic production alone would not win the crowd over. He had called Masanobu and according to him Yuichi had called Wataru once

somehow or other Wataru's sister, who was asked to play the part of girlfriend, had not shown up.

"It doesn't seem like there'd be a girl who'd stand Yuichi up, you know?"

"You mean Karin? I've never met her either, but she seems like a nice girl. Come to think of it, I've heard that she and Wataru are similar enough to be twins."

"Huh. Then he should just go out with her."

That's absurd...thought Masanobu with a wry smile, as Shohei huffily crossed his legs. Yuichi had a strong sense of responsibility, so whatever it was that was delaying him was likely out of his hands; once he undertook something he would never abandon it partway-through. Even though Shohei anticipated as much when he stirred Yuichi up to donate, if the auction itself was canceled at the last minute the plan he bothered to set up would only be half as effective. It was certain that his image would be ruined; there would no longer be enough need to care about what girls thought to prepare a fake girlfriend.

"Umm, well then, on to the next commodity! We have a PS2 starting at ¥1000!"

Maybe it was imagination, but Kawamura as well seemed to be stiffening his expression as he worked the crowd up. He would probably have to face a booing crowd if Yuichi failed to show up. Even if he tried to stall, once all the items were auctioned off they were gone, and other than the current PS2, all that were left were Yuichi's watch and fountain pen.

"I really don't like how even the dark-eyed boy isn't here. His sister's one thing, but aren't he and Yuichi

together? Hey, Masa. You have any idea?"

"What do you mean, dark-eyed boy...?"

"He's got those huge dark eyes that stand out. He doesn't he? That's what kind-of tricked my brother's daughter. It's looking like I'm gonna lose two relatives. How about a little sympathy?"

Unamused by how things were not turning out the way he planned, Shohei's voice had uncharacteristically lost its composure. He had made light of being able to have as much control as he wanted over the feelings of young lovers, but it looked like he had underestimated them a bit.

"...Damn it, what's going on? If he really does show, he'll get more than just a frown for it."

"Kawamura is Wataru's best friend, so I doubt he would do anything that puts him on the spot."

"Like you can tell."

"Eh?"

"You know it, too. To Yuichi, nothing matters but that dark-eyed boy. If a former honor student like him turns on you, you've got problems. You might as well go with the one who's a lot easier to handle. I've just now looked at things in a different light."

If his own reputation fell to the ground, and that caused problems for people, he did not care. That was honestly the first time Shohei had seen his brother run with such a seemingly careless decision. At the same time, he was thunderstruck to realize the possibility that Yuichi, above all the "good boy" of the Kazuki family, was actually the whole time hiding something even more tempestuous than himself. That was how shocking the

irresponsible Yuichi's conduct was to Shohei.

While the two were talking the PS2 went for ¥4500, and at last it was Yuichi's turn. Naturally, the color drained from Kawamura's face as he said "Umm, just a moment please" and hurriedly moved to the corner to consult with his classmates. Onlookers who suspected from that that there would be nothing to follow started to murmur and express dissatisfaction. When someone loudly asked "Where's Kazuki?" it was the start of a much louder tumult.

"Why hasn't Kazuki shown up?"

"And here that's the reason I went to the bank first."

"Hey, Mister Organizer! Tell us what's going on!"

"Is Kazuki not here? Was it not true that he'd be here today?"

As Shohei listened, it was enough to make him frown; there was no end to the voices of protest. Masanobu also felt somewhat ensnared by the bizarre tension around him. When he glanced at Kawamura and the others, he could tell that they were, to a pitiful extent, flustered at not knowing how to deal with the unforeseen situation.

"...Oh, Wataru."

Masanobu shifted his gaze in disappointment towards the hallway, and murmured softly in his mouth. Surprised, Shohei tried looking in that direction, but it was soon reconsidered: "...or so I thought, but it was a girl."

"What a surprise, though. For a second I really thought it was Wataru. Not just the face, but her

disposition was the same, I guess... Shohei, could maybe be his sister Karin?"

"Why...?"

"Pardon?"

"Why is even Toko here?"

The girl Masanobu spotted who looked like Wataru was for some reason with Shohei's Toko. For a long time she had shown Yuichi affection like a little brother, so maybe she caught wind of an auction somewhere and came to see it, but the question was why she seemed to be on good terms with the man who seemed to be Wataru's sister. They saw the girl continuing to boo, and looked at each other uneasily.

"Dark-eyed boy, are you and your sister trying to corrode the Kazuki blood?"

"You don't have to exaggerate so..."

"...Fine. Enough's enough."

Shohei sighed very deeply and looked up at the ceiling, as if to say he was giving up.

"Even though the 'girlfriend' sister is here, Yuichi pulls a no-show. What it means is a cancellation."

"Shall we go, then? Everyone's making a racket and there's no use in hanging around."

"Don't be stupid. There's no way I can do that."

"Huh...?"

"The big brother has to cover for the little brother's foolish move."

Maybe he didn't catch the meaning, but Masanobu didn't reply right away. Shohei, though, immediately reoriented himself towards changing the situation and decided for now to make Yuichi

owe him one.

"You know, I guess I really do want him to be a prince."

"Prince..."

"Right. It kind of has an overdone feel to it, but doesn't it tie in with his appeal?"

"...I don't really follow."

Smiling an intrepid smile at the surprised Masanobu, Shohei slowly, with shoes on, stood on top of his chair. Because he didn't even have to speak to attract attention, the noisy crowd instantly became quiet, as if taken aback. Before long, the ranks of women who were wondering what was happening nailed their gazes on Shohei, as if entranced by his good looks. Next, sighs of wonder could be heard here and there.

"I heard that people could jump at this point."

The gallant carrying voice absorbed the interest of all present even more strongly. Shohei slowly took his watch off in a suggestive manner, and with a first-class smile announced to everyone:

"A Rolex Explorer II, black face with red hands. I bought it three years ago, but due to rotation I've only worn it once a month, so it's grade A. Its retail value is 500,000. Well?"

"Sh-Shohei! Are you sure?!"

"While we're at it, the Gucci jacket being worn by the handsome man sitting next to me."

"Eh..."

He yanked Masanobu by the arm to force him to stand up, and once again there were small cheers primarily from the women. Involved with no prior

notice, Masanobu protested in a bewildered state.

"Wh-What are you talking about? I..."

"Shh! Look, even the guys got a glint in their eyes when they heard 'Gucci.' Sure enough, high school kids take the bait. Gucci, Vuitton, Prada...even they're coveted, established brands. Even as prizes."

"Well, sorry for being lowbrow."

"Come on. I'll buy you something as a replacement later."

When Shohei grinned calmly, he met Masanobu's amazed glare. But, as if he knew not to question Shohei, Masanobu soon gave up with a resigned "Well, I guess so..."

"This way, maybe Wataru too can save his face with his best friend."

"Knock yourself out. Even though I both of you get you two alone, he really had you in his palm, didn't he?"

"Don't be so negative. Things have only just begun."

Masanobu tossed his reply back lightly without much fighting spirit, and then flashed a small smile. He coolly let all the looks pouring from all sides flow over him, and in exasperation imitated Shohei standing on his chair.

"Uh...um..."

Maybe he could not keep up with the rapid development in the situation, but Kawamura rushed in his bewildered state. The enthusiasm had thoroughly returned to the room with their sudden participation.

girls gazed at them absorbedly, and the guys had faces that expressed a keen interest in the extravagance of the offered items.

"Uh, are you...sure about this...?"

"Of course. You see, Wataru asked me to do this. If there was some kind of trouble and Kazuki didn't make it in time, please do something to follow up, he said."

"Wataru did...?"

"Because his sister seemed to have gone missing. I'm sure something must have come up."

Kawamura seemed to be a bit moved by Masanobu's words. They were a white lie, but to be able to come up with something as haphazard as that so smoothly, even Shohei was filled with admiration when he heard it.

"Okay, then let's restart the auction!"

Forgetting the dark face he had up until a moment ago, a revitalized Kawamura cheerfully shouted. As if they had been waiting for it, the crowd burst into applause, and from the hallway came a voice: "Good job, Kawamura!" After he noticed a woman grinning and waving, he said "Mitsuki..." and deep emotion choked him up. Shohei and Masanobu looked at each other at the same time and smiled wryly: "One way or another!"

"Without further ado! Our main attraction today, Kazuki, was unable to participate due to a personal situation, but in his place let me introduce these two who have volunteered to take part. First, on my left is Masanobu Asaka, a student at T-U. By the way, he is

also an upperclassman of Yuichi Kazuki."

There were squeals from here and there. Masanobu sighed as if to say "Give me a break." Shohei looked pleasingly sideways at him, Kawamura put on airs as he said "Moving on..."

"On my right, Yuichi Kazuki's older brother legendary student council president of our own Ryoh High, Shohei Kazuki!"

"Hey, hey, since when did I become a legend?"

Shohei's little comeback was drowned by the loud cheers of the excited onlookers. Knowing anything, Kawamura only intended to make an exaggerated introduction, but in reality even the anecdote of "the blonde student council president who brought about school reform" was deep-rooted and handed down amongst some at the school.

"Well then, why don't we start with the Roll Call First..."

"It's a high priced item, so might it be best to let the owner himself set the starting price?"

Reservedly interrupting Kawamura, a female student walked into the room. Two more followed her. Something must have happened, as all three had red eyes.

"Tachibana...you..."

"Sorry I'm late, Kawamura. I'll do my best from here on so will you forgive me?"

"....."

"Uh, I really do think...I was in the wrong..."

An unpleasant silence continued for a short time and as no one there knew the situation they watched

see the outcome.

Before long, the tension suddenly drained from Kawamura's shoulders and he patted Mai on the back.

"Sure thing. Then, ask our conspicuous friends over there about their asking prices."

"Th...Thanks..."

Maybe she was relieved from the bottom of her heart, as Mai's eyes once again welled with tears. She hurriedly wiped them away, and with short steps rushed over to the new auction stars.

"I beg your pardon, my name is Mai Tachibana."

Mai raised her head determinedly, and she confidently informed Shohei of her name.

"You're...Kazuki's brother? I heard Kawamura's introduction from outside."

"Right, that's correct."

"Could you...tell him I said I'm sorry? I won't trouble him anymore."

"....."

"Please."

She bowed her head very deeply, and Shohei felt that somehow or other he had grasped the circumstances. Perhaps Yuichi's sudden cancellation and her apology were not unrelated. He sure was a bungler for how popular he was with the ladies.

"All right. I'll let him know. So, how much should we start from?"

"Eh?"

"For the commemorative price of unrequited love, how about we start at ¥1000?"

At Shohei's utterance, a great commotion spread around him.

"¥1000!"

"¥1100!"

"¥1200!"

Without a moment's delay a flood of hands shot into the air, and Kawamura and Mai both did their best to keep up with the response. A cheerful enthusiasm and excitement enveloped the room, and standing at the center of it Shohei exaggerated to Masanobu, "This is the start of a new legend, eh?"

The student council office, which everyone had vacated, was now quiet.

One side of the overlapping shadows stretched a little.

"...Kazuki..."

A sound that resembled a sigh quietly seeped into the tranquil space.

"Kazuki, is it okay if you don't go back...?"

"Same to you."

While the two embraced and exchanged their intermittent conversation, their pulses overlapped solely.

Under the slowly darkening sky, they were like children indulging in eternity.

Or perhaps like lovers unable to broadcast their promise of tomorrow.

"How'd you know they were here? I was sure you'd gone to the auction."

While focusing on Yuichi's pulse, W

wanted to say something, so he spoke up. Silence and kisses were enjoyable too, but now he wanted to hear his lover's voice. Being whispered to in his arms...that sound resonating through him was many times more pleasant.

"You surprised me, showing up so suddenly at a time like that..."

"First, I looked around here and there. A girl from your class came expressly to tell me Karin went home sick. Any way you look at it, wasn't it weird for you, her brother, to be out of the loop? I pretended to go along with it and called you right away to make sure."

"Gotcha..."

"Then, sure enough, you didn't know anything. My gut told me this was bad news. If something happened to Karin, it was my responsibility. So, I quickly tried to think of what secluded place she might have been taken to."

Despite the current situation, until several months ago he had been a Ryokuyo student. He said as much, and then let out a big sigh like he was exhausted.

"But honestly, it's too bad that this room was used. It means it's no longer just our private place. Well, you probably visit here less often since I graduated...oh well."

"Yeah...it sure has been a while. That's why I didn't think of it right away. Since you left, I'd been intentionally avoiding places with memories attached. If I remember too much, it kind-of goes straight to my heart when I'm alone. I was thinking, 'I can't just turn and look back at the past like that all the time.'"

"That's what you call looking forward for a reason..."

After talking mean to him, Yuichi once again held Wataru tightly. With his face buried in Wataru's forelocks, he continued to murmur intimately.

"We really did a bad thing to Karin..."

"Yeah... Let's go apologize to her together later. She went through more of a scare than 'sorry' can cover, so I plan to do whatever she asks for a while."

"If there's anything I can do too, tell me. I'll do anything."

"All right."

Wataru nodded, and Yuichi softly separated and finally displayed a soft expression. He leaned against the wall as if relieved, and while leaning slowly sat down on the floor. Wataru knew that the tension in him had lessened and he knelt down and drew near him again. Without a moment's delay he was drawn in by the extended leg, arm, and embraced tightly from behind.

"Kazuki..."

"Haven't you lost a little weight? Don't strain your nerves too much, doing nothing but studying."

With his arms pinned behind him, the voice of Wataru whispered teasingly near his ears. His body was filled with Yuichi's warmth, and his skin stimulated by his breath. That was enough to entice Wataru into a sweet giddiness.

After Mai and the others left and Karin tactfully said "I'll head over to the auction before you," they really should have headed out themselves. When they realized the time, it was ten minutes before the auction

was scheduled to end. Even if they ran to the classroom, they would just barely make it.

Despite that, Wataru was unable to move.

Yuichi as well did not bother to say "Let's go."

"I wonder...how I should apologize to Kawamura..."

"Does it bug you?"

"Of course it does. He was all happy about Mitsuki coming by. He wanted to impress her. But since I detained you, I'm sure..."

He could ill-afford to think that far into it, but the auction failing would cause Kawamura a lot of damage. For that reason, he might not forgive him even if he apologized, and it created a dark mood for Wataru.

"This is a first for me. Even though it's a burden on everyone, I wanted to be with you, Kazuki. I didn't want to pretend like nothing happened and watch all the fuss over you at the auction. Even though you would be the one spoken badly of and said to be irresponsible for skipping out on donating..."

"I don't really mind. If everyone was disappointed and gave up, I'd be free of a heavy weight."

"That's not the problem, though. Besides...as methods go, this really is the worst. We've spoiled something for those who simply came to enjoy seeing you."

The more he talked, the deeper his self-loathing became. In any case, the person who most needed an apology was Kawamura. It was because he had not stifled his feelings of hesitation that a betrayal of his best friend had come to pass in the eleventh hour.

"...It's no use. After this I'm definitely going to go apologize to him. He's always been my ally concerning you until now, so it'll be hard to face him after this. He's my best friend, and yet at the crucial moment I yanked the rug out from under him."

No sooner had he said it that he tried to escape from Yuichi's arms and stand up. But Yuichi would not permit it, and more and more strength went into his embrace. His freedom of mobility stolen, Wataru still struggled for a bit, but before long his willpower unexpectedly ran out. When he thought that apologizing to Kawamura right now, he came to feel deeply ashamed.

Without a word Wataru became depressed, and at last Yuichi relaxed his arms. He again interlaced his fingers with Wataru's, and said something unexpected.

"As for the auction, don't worry. My brother and Masanobu should have things well in-hand."

"Huh...?"

When Wataru turned to look over his shoulder, an unconcerned smile came into view.

"Even I anticipated that much. If I bailed out donating, my brother would surely cover for me. He likes festivals, so when it comes down to it of course he'll take the spotlight. I'm sure Asaka will get dragged into it too, and it'll probably be bigger than if I showed up."

"Are you for-real...?"

"No way I'd act unpredictably, right? As if I'd move to the beat of my brother's drum. Instead, I'll let him do his thing to his heart's content."

"Kazuki..."

Beside a dumbfounded Wataru, Yuichi muttered "Serves him right" in a triumphant tone.

"When I found out that Karin was missing, I thought from the bottom of my heart that I was a fool. I had put her in harm's way just because I asked her to do a petty favor. I wasn't big on the auction to begin with, and afterwards I thought many times about bailing...and I regretted not doing so the entire time I was searching for her."

"Then you should have said so..."

"But it would've caused problems for your best friend."

Despite always making Kawamura mad with his ill-natured attitude, in the end this kind of thing really was Yuichi. Wataru felt a lump in his throat, and could not really answer. The reason he had consented to donating in the first place was because Wataru was bewildered by Shohei's banter. Yuichi must not have been able to overlook how Wataru's face darkened at the fleeting glimpse of his past.

"Kazuki, why did you think that your brother would follow up for you?"

Wataru was wrapped in feelings of relief, and automatically leaned back heavily on Yuichi's chest. While playing with Wataru's hair with his fingertips, Yuichi answered briefly in a tone full of confidence.

"I just knew... We're brothers."

"....."

"No matter how much my reputation suffers, it won't hurt and I won't care because I have you, Wataru. But my brother's different. If I came to be hated, he



definitely wouldn't find it amusing. And at any rate, once he realizes that his own plans aren't going well, he'll probably adapt his strategy right away. That's the kind of guy he is."

"Shohei..."

"Hm?"

"You really are dear to him..."

It was more baffling than he could take when Wataru thought of how much abusive speech and conduct he had used. But, perhaps that was what made Shohei, Shohei. It was no big deal to him to be hated by someone he loved. Or else, maybe he had so much confidence that Yuichi did not truly hate him.

"Anyway Wataru, don't worry about anything. If Asaka is involved, he'll probably come up with some good excuse for you. It's all right, the auction is a hit."

"I wonder...if this is best..."

"It is. We were used by them again this time. This is conservative, as revenge goes."

For reasons of amazement and admiration, Wataru was speechless at his wholly calm and composed manner. Put bluntly, everything had gone the way Yuichi had planned. Today, they were supposed to be in the palm of Shohei's hand, but at some point the situation had reversed.

Thanks to that reversal of fortune, they were getting to spend time together the way Wataru had imagined it. They had been unable to walk the school halls together, but he never even thought he would be able to spend his last culture festival this way. While reflecting upon the unforeseen happiness, Wataru looked

up softly at Yuichi. Before he found the words to say, his finger quietly touched his cheek.

"Wataru...I love you so much."

Yuichi lovingly occupied the lips that had so long waited to open. The kiss was gently tinged with a smile, and the reservedly entwined tongues gave birth over and over to a new eagerness.

"I'm glad I met you, Wataru."

His words blurred the kiss with a smile.

"However noisy it's been around us, how many feelings it's resulted in. If you didn't exist, my school would have lost its value to me long ago. But I'm happy that it didn't, and I think I'd like to go on keeping those high school memories precious. Wataru, you've added something extra....to my life, to my feelings. So, let's go on enjoying you forever."

"Kazuki..."

"If you're here I can smile, I can get angry, I can even cry. If you're in my arms, and you respond to my kisses, I'm pretty sure I can do anything."

Yuichi glanced down at Wataru's fingers, and smiled a slightly wry smile.

"Although it's too bad that we couldn't both wear our rings today."

"Oh, sorry..."

"I don't really mind. Considering I was supposed to bring a girlfriend, there's no way you could wear the same ring. Women spot those kinds of things. Like Takako."

He said the name of his precocious niece, and this time clearly burst into laughter. Wataru thought

it was funny too, and the two went on laughing while holding each other for some time.

"I love you, Wataru."

"Yeah, me too... I love you, Kazuki."

They repeated a light kiss, and both their words were abandoned. It really had been a long time since this kind of calm. Starting tomorrow Wataru would again become an exam student, and the days where he missed busy Yuichi would probably increase. But he had a modest self-confidence that things would work out.

"I'm glad I was able to confess to you like this once more in the very place where we met."

Gazing lovingly at Wataru's expression, Yuichi quietly opened his mouth.

"I don't wear a uniform anymore, and there's not much time left before you graduate. But, if possible I wanted us to do this together. Like this, hidden and fully enjoying our handicapped happiness."

Hidden from the public eye, adding to the lies...

But their feelings were as honest as could be.

Wataru quietly closed his eyes and said "...I love you." Even if it was shining only on Yuichi's hand, he could definitely feel a ring's presence on his own ring finger.

Far away, a chime resounded.

In the space of an instant, they nostalgically chased after the people they had been when they first met.

Afterword

Hello, this is Kannagi. I am exceedingly happy to finally deliver the third book in the series to you a year and a half after the last one, "The Left Hand Dream of Him." I really do not know how many people were waiting for this, but I wonder if you enjoyed the unexpectedly high number of individually published sections that came to form this book. And also, to readers who started with this book, I think there are ad on the last pages, so if you are so inclined, by all means please have a look at the path of Kazuki and Wataru love from the beginning.

Umm, well then, this is a little embarrassing, but now for some comments on the story.

First, the title "The Ring Finger." In any case the most difficult thing was the title. I threw out dozens of them, and it really was rough right up until the deadline. Even though the first book, "Only the Ring Finger Knows" was okayed on the first go, which should be commemorated, it did not go so well this time... Even now when I look at memos from that period, I smile bitterly in spite of myself at the chaos all the title ideas suggest.

I also worried over what to make Kazuki's part-time job. In the end I used my personal affinity for the "garçon look" to settle on a cafe, but I definitely should

not have been wrong in murmuring "I'm sure my readers want to see Kazuki drawn as a waiter by Miss Odagiri. Of course, the one who wants to see it most is me." When it came out, I was enthralled by the beauty that exceeded my expectations.

The "Chinese national treasure band" that appears in the text actually exists. I went to their concert too, and it really was splendid and there were many instruments that you don't normally see, so it really got me hyped up on China. By the way, "The Sense of English" book is also interesting. If you get a chance, by all means check them both out.

Then there was the installment "Your Confession etc." Would anyone believe now...that the first manuscript was only eighty pages long? And it became such a long story. "The Ring Finger etc." was thematically serious, so this time I used the comfortable setting of a campus, making the plot close to the atmosphere set up at the outset of the story. In the original story Wataru was always worried, so I wanted to get back to the essentially cheerful him. But, in the end he was worn out by Shohei standing out... (pathos)

Speaking of Shohei, it was much fun writing the exchange between the Kazuki brothers. The single troublesome point was that anyone you put together with Shohei ended up becoming passive. I even thought... maybe Shohei is the ultimate seme? My editor told me "It's too bad he has a wife and kid." Actually, I confess here that when Miss Odagiri drew him in the last book I gnashed my teeth saying "Too bad...too bad he was Takako's dad..." Well, maybe despite doing whatever

he wants, having a steadfast beautiful wife and cute daughter is his strength.

Oh, by the way there's a personal mistake I caught. In the latter half, in the passage where Kazuki enters, I automatically wrote "audition" instead of "auction" at one point. I noticed it upon revision and hurriedly changed it, but Kazuki, I guess you were planning on going to some audition somewhere...

Above I wrote about the atmosphere at the original outset, and that was why all the characters made an appearance in such a bustling fashion. Some were only mentioned in name, but I used some who showed up in the past in dialogue or a picture. In that way, the story has here come to an end. For now this is the end of Kazuki experiencing an excessive amount of trouble with the girls, and our look at Wataru's high school life. Of course, Kazuki is as always popular with women and Wataru is still a student, but next time the story might be about them living together. There is also Asaka, the identity of the "strictly speaking" partner from the anecdote in the first book, and whether Shohei will more openly create problems, so I plan to make it a straight line to the climax with that kind of feel! In any case, it looks like I am going to get to write about them a while more, so I would be happy if you waited at your leisure for the continuation.

And now, here is what I will enjoy waiting for! The previous book, "The Left Hand Dreams of Him," will be making its debut as a drama CD thanks to Movic. The release date is a little before the end of April, but I too will be excited about it from now until then. To

think that the day would come when I could again hear the world of "Ring Finger" on a CD... The leading roles are like last time done by the well-received Kenichi Suzumura (Wataru) and Takahiro Sakurai (Kazuki). Thanks to the way their enthusiastic performances fit the image exactly and to everyone's warm impressions of the "Ring Finger" CD and their requests for a sequel, another new door has been opened. I will fill you in on details at any time in the Chara magazine or else on my homepage (personally, I'm concerned about Asaka's part...), so please look forward to it!

Once again, I offer my sincerest thanks to Miss Hotaru Odagiri for drawing beautiful illustrations that grab the readers' hearts. In spite of the ultra-strict schedule, thank you for all the enchantingly cool Kazukis and charming dark-eyed-boy Watarus. I need not comment on their looks, and I am always saved by her treatment of accessories and such and good clothing sense. (cry) I too will try my hardest and devote myself bit by bit, so please keep up the good work from here on.

To my editor I always cause problems for, thank you for all your help. During the writing this time, I was all taken aback like "Oh, yes he was!" (like a brand new parent...) to your "Kazuki was a lonely person until he and Wataru fell in love." I think you probably grasp the story and characters better than I do. I will work hard again this year, so please do not desert me.

Finally, to the readers who have watched over Wataru and Kazuki. Truly, thank you for everything. They seem like they still have a trouble or two ahead of

them, but please stick with these two who will grow
by bit through love. I will be awaiting your thoughts and
requests, so if there is anything, do not hesitate to ask.
Well, we shall meet again.

Satoru Kannagi

Profile

Satoru Kannagi

Writer

Born 3/26

Aries

Blood Type A

From Ibaraki Prefecture • Residing in Tokyo

Local video stores are disappearing, as I grow farther and farther away from a cultured lifestyle. Maybe I'll make my goal this year to see as many movies in the theater as I can. I will also stop calling off things at the last minute on account of giving up on them...

Hotaru Odagiri

Illustrator

Born 10/5

Libra

Blood Type O

Residing in Tokyo

Manga artist, works include "Time Lag," "Only the Ring Finger Knows" (Tokuma Shoten), and others...

ONLY THE RING FINGER KNOWS

その指だけが
知っている

THE RING FINGER FALLS SILENT

Volume 3

By
Satoru Kannagi
Hotaru Odagiri

June

Yaoi

Novel